Humor, Power and Culture: A New Theory on the Experience and Ethics of Humor

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HUMOR, POWER, AND CULTURE:
A NEW THEORY ON THE EXPERIENCE AND ETHICS OF HUMOR

by

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ABSTRACT
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The aim of this dissertation is to offer a new theory of humor that takes seriously both the universality and power of humor in culture. In the first chapter, I summarize historical and contemporary theories, and show how each either 1) fails to give any definition of humor, 2) fails as a theory of humor, and/or 3) underappreciates, dismisses, or does not consider the power of humor in experience.

The second chapter explains the failures of prior theories by understanding the problem in terms of Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms. These forms of culture are perspectives through which we express and understand our world, and each presents its own unique perspectives through which we can understand ourselves and the world. In the third chapter, I argue that humor is one of these necessary and universal symbolic forms of culture. I argue that confusions in the philosophy of humor stem from approaches to humor that understand it as part of some other symbolic form rather than as a form itself.

In the fourth chapter, I argue for the function of humor as that which reveals and exposes epistemic vices –laziness, arrogance, and closed-minded thinking about ourselves and the world. I support this argument by showing not only that all previous theories of humor have within them epistemic revelation as a consistent commonality, but also by showing that this revelation is necessary to the form of humor while it is, at best, accidental to other forms.

In my final chapter, I suggest that we ought to approach humor objectively, and that the normativity of the symbolic forms guides us toward such an approach. I offer two objective questions to ask about a given instance of humor: 1) does the humor idealize a liberated end? and 2) does the humor fulfil the cultural function of the symbolic form it represents by disrupting epistemically vicious thinking? If the answer to both of these questions is affirmative, then it is likely that the humor in question is morally praiseworthy. I conclude by offering suggestions for further study.

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This project would owes its genesis to three events. My philosophical world was dramatically enlarged by Dr. Theresa Tobin's assurance that philosophy need not be limited to those ideas and scholars who fit the traditional mold. Within academic institutions, philosophy appears to be an elite field for particular people with particular concerns, only fit for those who have the time and economic advantages necessary to devote oneself entirely to the aggrandizement of its superiority. Dr. Tobin gave me the confidence I needed to see myself as an authentic philosopher despite the fact that I do not fit this description.

I joined the most enthusiastic group of philosophers, The Lighthearted Philosophers' Society, in 2013. They are warm, honest, funny, and passionate scholars eager to help and grow the field. The conferences are a consistent joy – two days of celebration of thought and scholarship, a reunion of thinkers with genuine goodwill and love for each other. I am proud to be a member of this family of brilliant goofballs. They have encouraged me, mentored me, and trusted me, from coursework to job applications, for five years. Elizabeth Victor, Thomas Brommage, Steven Gimbel, Eugenio Zaldivar, Elizabeth Sills – cheers to you.

Dr. Sebastian Luft is a performative example of the sort of scholar I hope to be. He combines an encyclopedic knowledge of cultural history with rigorous philosophical critique, and presents this information in perfectly digested and creative works that speak to contemporary concerns. His concern is always for clarity, though never at the expense of rigor. His work maintains the humanity that many metaphysically and epistemologically inclined treatise ignore. Never does he forget that philosophy informs *life*, that is, truly *living* as social beings that laugh, fight, poeticize, and dance. When he introduced me to Cassirer, I suddenly realized the lineage of this love of philosophy, that it stretched back into the interpreters of Kant – the very philosopher with whom I first deeply connected as a college freshman. Both in the classroom and in guided readings, tracing the evolution of ideas in German philosophy with Dr. Luft allowed me to see a bridge between my background in Kantian philosophy and my interests in the experience of humor.

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INTRODUCTION

The philosophy of humor has been a neglected field, spoken of briefly by a few canonical philosophers here and there, with a recent resurgence in the last thirty years. The latter can also be said of Neo-Kantian Ernst Cassirer, who, while popular and influential in his time, was forgotten rather quickly, as was the philosophy of culture to which he was dedicated. Cassirer died shortly after taking an appointment at Yale University, having fled Nazi Germany years earlier. His major contribution, a philosophy of symbolic forms, serves as both the metaphysical background and methodological guide of this study.

Given the non-serious nature of humor, very few scholars are interested in doing this work. Humor, while infiltrating every space and culture in human history, has often been dismissed or overlooked, regarded as either invisible or unworthy of rigorous examination. While popular culture has begun making claims about the similarities between comedians and philosophers, the discipline of philosophy has not yet taken up these connections. Few historical accounts exist, and are mainly descriptive, quickly dismissed as outdated, overly simplistic or broad, or, when normative claims are present, are woefully undertheorized and/or unhelpfully subjective.

Recently philosophers have begun taking advantage of humor as an attractive gateway to introduce popular audiences to philosophy itself, such as Al Gini (2017), Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klein (authors of *Plato and a Platypus Walk Into a Bar*, 2008) and numerous volumes from the popular culture and philosophy series published by Open Court and Blackwell (see Marra 2015a, Marra 2016). These texts tend to be somewhat unremarkable in their philosophical content but wide in their use of example

jokes. Many authors follow the trend of opening their texts by announcing an awareness of humor as antithetical to rigor, and thus defend a non-rigorous approach to the topics at hand, as I mention in a forthcoming review of Gini's 2017 *The Importance of Being Funny*, in which he writes:

> Please allow me to apologise in advance, because, in order to do this, we need to start by examining, ever so briefly, three classic theories that philosophers (Lord, save us!) have come up with to explain why we find humour in and laugh at jokes…Unfortunately, the only thing that these theories prove is that theories on humour are definitely not humorous… As Bob Mankoff […] succinctly points out, "Although humour is a fascinating topic, academics being academics can take the fun out of it and make it boring". (20-22)

This strategy may be well intentioned: authors aiming to meet readers "where they are" assume general consensus that philosophy and critique are boring and ultimately useless, and aim to reassure the reader that what is contained within may be somewhat interesting and simple. Unfortunately, this strategy has also infected works aimed at academics. Many philosophers of humor feel as though their work *ought* to be superficial, *ought* to be entertaining, and *ought* to retain the lightheartedness inherent within the topic itself. Consequently, save a few notable examples (see Gimbel 2017), texts on humor tend to lack critical engagement and are largely concerned with making sure that *the study itself* is humorous (see Richards 2013).

I have always found this peculiar. There is no topic of philosophical investigation of which I am aware that insists upon a reproduction of that topic within the investigation

itself. No investigations of love, for example, demand that the writing itself make one feel such an emotion, nor are critical writings on poetry expected to be themselves poetic. Two arguments are implied by these approaches to the philosophy of humor. The first is a fear of the bias within the philosophical community regarding what "counts" as philosophy –humor appeals to all of us, so it must be too simple to taken seriously by the philosophical community. "True" or "real" philosophy is incomprehensible to most, and should remain so. To philosophize about anything that appeals to a wide audience, like humor, or, even worse, comedy, is to undermine philosophy itself. This view hinges on an arbitrary definition of what philosophy is and how it must be done. It abides by an elitism that turns up its nose at the common person, that prides itself on being distinct from the masses, and that disregards major cultural attitudes and movements as uneducated and unenlightened. Furthermore, rather than aiming to understand those attitudes or reach those masses, the philosophical elitist disengages himself from the public, often preferring to engage in exegetical work of the traditional canon. As a result of this bias, most philosophers of humor waited until they were already well-established within their "rigorous" field and in comfortable academic positions before dipping their toes into humor research. This has created scholarship that is relatively superficial, with many scholars treading old ground, publishing with comparative ease (regardless of their depth of familiarity with the topic at hand) due to the novelty of the topic. Junior and unestablished scholars fear that humor research will disadvantage them in job searches or interviews, and thus may take a casual interest but dare not risk giving humor the attention required to make advancements in the field. Essentially, it is this attitude that has caused humor research within the philosophical community to remain stagnant.

The heavy reliance on the most often cited author in the philosophy of humor, John Morreall, is also responsible for some stagnation within the field. Morreall published his first book on humor in 1983, and as of the time of this writing has produced six books and approximately 60 articles on the topic. Morreall's work has been incredibly important for the development of the field, of this there is no question. Any one of us looking for direction in beginning our investigations of humor or teaching a class with philosophy of humor as its focus begin with his work. Unfortunately, the texts have not aged well. Morreall's focus seems to have been to prove to his colleagues that the philosophy of humor has a grounding in philosophical canonical history; his reference collection *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (1987) is a wonderful resource that I make great use of in this dissertation. It serves as a fine bibliography of where philosophers spoke of laughter and humor – his excerpts, edits, and introductory remarks to the reprintings of original sources from the likes Plato, Aquinas, and Hobbes, to name a few, simplify the theories to the detriment of original work, and at least one citation (specifically for Thomas Aquinas' work, is incorrect. His original contributions suffer from superficial examinations of those historical sources and, at times, blatant falsehoods regarding the philosophers in question – it is remarkable to read his depiction of Sartre as a determinist in *Comic Relief* (2009, 131), for example.

In the community of philosophers of humor, it almost goes without saying that Morreall's contributions leave much to be desired. Work is in progress to replace these introductory texts with more updated, rigorous, and accurate collections – but until these projects are completed, many interested in the philosophy of humor will continue to turn to Morreall, and continue to rely on incorrect, shallow, or underdeveloped accounts of the

historical sources. As long as scholars take Morreall's word, the same mistakes will be repeated, again and again, in the literature. Steps forward require we revisit the texts themselves and analyse them with fresh eyes rather than accepting the interpretations of our predecessors – Steven Gimbel (2017) and Sheila Lintott (2016) are two exemplary models of the insights we gain when we insist upon critical scholarship in the philosophy of humor.

The second implied argument is that philosophy is serious, stressful work, and humor is a reprieve from that work. Therefore, the implied argument goes, philosophy should not "ruin" humor by infiltrating its domain. To philosophize in any true sense about humor would be, in a sense, to demolish it. This implication seems to be at odds with the first, though both are often held simultaneously – philosophy is hard, and why make something enjoyable hard too? (This is one of the most common questions I have been asked by fellow philosophers: "doesn't studying it just ruin it for you?") Of course, both arguments are puzzling in their superficiality. Insofar as philosophy is, at base, the investigation of human experience, and humor is an undeniable part of that experience, refusing to philosophize about humor is to intentionally and systematically undermine philosophy itself. Furthermore, to act as though philosophizing about something enjoyable will ruin that thing is to simply betray his own dissatisfaction with the act of doing philosophy, as well as reveal a stark disconnect between what he finds important as a philosopher and what he finds important as a human being. At the same time one holds philosophy on a pedestal of intellectual gravitas, he also holds a foundational opinion that that philosophy has no bearing or importance (and, perhaps, should not hold any bearing or importance) on the lives of himself and others. Humor is said to be ruined by critical

engagement in a way that love, sex and poetry are not. It is somehow too aloof to be subjected to serious, critical engagement. This is, in my opinion, completely arbitrary.

Of course, I hold no such attitudes. We ought to aim to understand humor with the same reverence and interest as we do any other aspect of human nature, and in doing so we will find a host of questions begging for answers that only philosophers can give. The philosophy of humor remains philosophy, philosophizing about culture remains philosophizing, and understanding the relationship between the human being and his artefacts remains a crucially important understanding. Humor research need not be handicapped by the biases of its researchers or the expectations of its readers. It is for these reasons that what follows is not a funny dissertation. While both critical and joyful in its conception, creation, and implementation, my focus is to engage in rigorous critique, not to make my reader laugh (though, hopefully, it won't make her cry either).

Chapter 1

I begin the first chapter by making clear the distinction between humor, laughter, and comedy. Humor is the broad category under which all methods of humor (like comedy) fall. Comedy is a performative event aimed to incite laughter. Laughter is a physiological event that has no necessary connection to either humor or comedy – we laugh often without the presence of humorous stimuli. The failure of historical and contemporary theories to take seriously these distinctions is partially responsible for the persistent confusion in the field. A great deal of progress has been made in the empirical sciences regarding laughter; very little has been said about humor as a cultural force. Those who don't pay close attention to the distinctions between these three concepts slide between speaking of the subject (the audience), the object (the stimulus), and the

response (laughter, smiling, etc.), and wind up articulating imprecise and unsuccessful theories, as I show in my summary of historical theories. I show how each either 1) fails to give any definition of humor, 2) fails as a theory of humor, and/or 3) underappreciates, dismisses, or does not consider the power of humor in experience. Contemporary theories, which aim to correct the mistakes of the past by offering more precise theories, some of which are supported by empirical evidence, are also shown to be unsatisfactory. I argue that these theories holistically fail, even in cases where the insights give us valuable pieces of the puzzle.

Chapter 2

The second chapter explains the failures of prior theories by understanding the problem in terms of Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms. Here is given a summary of Cassirer's methodological approach, and in particular, the necessity for interdisciplinary engagement in the asking and answering of philosophical questions about culture. For Cassirer, culture is created and sustained through symbolic forms. Unique to human beings, symbolic forms are unique perspectives through which we give meaning to our world. I also discuss the crucial normative claims Cassirer makes in light of his own experience in Nazi Germany. Each form of culture presents its own unique perspectives through which we can understand ourselves and the world, and no form is superior than the others. Science, for example, should not be considered the rational end of culture, and religion should not be thought of as a phase out of which humanity ought to grow. Rather, each form functions in its own way to assist humanity in its struggle toward the ultimate aim of self-liberation. Culture strives toward this ideal of freedom through expressing itself in and through these forms, and each form of expression

functions in its own particular way. I argue against the scientistic interpretations of Cassirer, arguing that symbolic forms co-exist in a horizontal, rather vertical, ordering.

Chapter 3

In the third chapter, I present my argument for humor as one of these necessary and universal symbolic forms of culture. I argue that humor meets the criteria of a symbolic form as a unique perspective that is irreducible to any other form. I argue that confusions in the philosophy of humor stem from approaches to humor that understand it as part of some other symbolic form rather than as a form itself. For example, Matthew Hurley, Reginald Adams, and David Dennett's evolutionary approach to humor (2011) considers the phenomena only in light of criteria fit for the symbolic form of science. As such, they are only interested in explanations of humor that fit within accepted scientific methodologies. A consequence of this approach is that it only gives us a fraction of the story; that is, while humor may have developed evolutionarily as a survival mechanism as the authors contend, to reduce humor to *merely* this mechanism would be to misrepresent and undermine the power and importance of humor as a socio-political, emotional, mythical, or linguistic force.

In addition to the explanatory power of understanding humor as a symbolic form when it comes to history of humor theory, I also argue that Cassirer's own analysis of humor and the comic show sympathies toward my thesis by analysing passages from *Essay on Man* (1944a) and *The Platonic Renaissance in England* (1953). I pay particular attention to the common understanding of humor as artistic expression, arguing that not only can humor not be reduced to art in terms of its internal laws and logics, but also that humor has a necessary function that is unique from the function of art.

Chapter 4

In the fourth chapter, I argue for the function of humor as that which reveals and exposes epistemic vices – that is, humor's role in the struggle for liberation in humanity is to disrupt our laziness, arrogance, and closed-minded thinking about ourselves and the world. According to José Medina (2013), this sort of thinking is what allows for oppressive cultures and attitudes. I support this argument by showing not only that all previous theories of humor have within them epistemic revelation as the only consistent commonality, but also by showing that this revelation is necessary to the form of humor while it is, at best, accidental to other forms. This completes both the negative and positive arguments for humor as a symbolic form: not only is humor distinct from the other forms, and is thus irreducible to them, but humor also meets the criteria to stand as a form on its own, with its unique function, and as a participant in the ideal end of culture.

Chapter 5

In my final chapter, I offer that the normative elements of the philosophy of symbolic forms can provide a means through which we can begin to develop an objective ethic of humor. There are three methods through which one could approach ethics in humor: subjectively, objectively, or by exemption. Subjective approaches argue that humor must always be understood within its particular context, must consider a number of factors such as the intent of the speaker and the reactions of the audience, and is unconcerned with the fact that it cannot provide a stable measure against which to determine moral value or moral responsibility. Objective approaches, on the other hand,

must provide a measure that can operate independently of the particulars of the humorous event. An objective approach aims to provide a means of judging the moral value of humor that can transcend the intent of the speaker or the reaction of the audience. Though beneficial in terms of determining moral value and responsibility, objective approaches to ethics in humor have been all but abandoned in contemporary humor theory.

The final approach is the most popular among comedians themselves. It argues that humorous speech and action are a special kind of communication that ought to be *exempt* from moral consideration altogether. Comedians like Jim Norton argue that humor plays a special role in culture by providing relief from the horrors of the world, and that to make moral judgments about those things would be to rob society of this important function ("Totally Biased: Extended Talk with Jim Norton and Lindy West - Video Dailymotion" n.d.). This view is similar to the Relief and Relaxation theories of humor popularized by Sigmund Freud (1928, 2002), St. Thomas Aquinas (1921), and Robert Latta (1999).

I offer that an objective ethic of humor is necessary if we are to justify nonarbitrary moral evaluation and hold others responsible for humor. Insofar as humor is a necessary element of human culture it has powerful influences on humanity. As such, humor should be understood as morally relevant. Exemption approaches, I argue, are simply untenable. Subjective approaches to humor may only be interested in taking humor on a case by case basis, but moral praise and blame require some sort of external measure in order to be placed justly. The threat of relativism in humor is particularly problematic if we understand humor as a symbolic form: the forms are pluralistic, not relativistic or hierarchically ordered. We must, then, have some sort of mechanism in

place for making moral judgments regarding humor that does not collapse into relativistic reasoning regarding the intention of a speaker or the reactions of an audience. While contextual elements may indeed be important in determining moral value, we cannot start with such a thesis and hope to create a consistent moral approach.

I suggest we begin with an understanding of culture's ultimate aim and humor's functional role in the struggle toward that aim. I suggest these two elements amount to two objective questions to ask about a given instance of humor: 1) does the humor idealize a liberated end? and 2) does the humor fulfil the cultural function of the symbolic form it represents by disrupting epistemically vicious thinking? If the answer to both of these questions is affirmative, then it is likely that the humor in question is morally praiseworthy. With this as a starting point, we can begin the work developing a robust ethic of humor that avoids the problems of subjective and exemption theories. I conclude by offering suggestions for further study.

THE PHILOSOPHY OF HUMOR[1]

In this chapter, I will review historical and contemporary theories of humor across disciplines. I will show that, in each case, the theory fails to be both descriptively and normatively tenable. As each fall victim to one (or often both) of the following problems: 1) they are either riddled with conceptual confusion between the categories of humor, comedy, and laughter, or 2) they claim a universalism that is clearly Eurocentric. Contemporary accounts, on the other hand, are much more conscious of Eurocentricity infiltrating theory, and tend to either 1) give purely mechanistic, descriptive accounts of humor or laughter, sometimes maintaining the same category mistakes of the past, or 2) opt instead for exclusively normative claims that are neither dependent upon or concerned with defining humor itself. Given the complexity, variety, and fluidity of humor, many theorists have abandoned the search for any single theory and instead offer analyses on particular kinds of humor in particular sociohistorical contexts.[2] While what follows is certainly not exhaustive, it does represent all categories of humor theory which have been considered seriously by scholars of multiple disciplines.

1.1: Humor versus Comedy versus Laughter

It is crucial to distinguish our main focus, humor, from those terms with which it is often conflated. Laughter and comedy, for example, are not the same thing as humor – when I refer to "humor", I refer to the broad category, while comedy is a particular

[1] Portions of this chapter appeared in Marra 2017b

[2] See Brian Ribeiro's account 2009, wherein he offers an account which he sarcastically claims is "pitched at roughly the same level of detail, and intended to have roughly the same level of inclusiveness" as those of Hobbes and Kant. ("A Distance Theory of Humor", *Think* 6 [17-18] [2008]: 139-148).

instantiation of that category. Laughter may or may not accompany either. In other words, humor is the universal, while comedy is a particular. The same is true of jokes, puns, practical jokes, wit, satire, etc.; these are all things (events, genres, etc.) which would fall under the heading of Humor, while Humor is an umbrella term which covers all of these instantiations. Of course, my precise definition of humor will be laid out in chapter three – for now, understanding humor as distinct in this way is plenty adequate.

Laughter is entirely different in kind from humor. While laughter often accompanies humor and its instantiations, there is no necessary connection between the two. Laughter is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for humor. We can see this through a plethora of examples. For instance, it is common for one to laugh when she is nervous, uneasy, overwhelmed, or tired. There need not be a particular humorous stimulus for laughter to occur. In fact, laughter ought to be understood as a purely physiological event rather than a cognitive one. That is, laughter is something that your body *does*, with or without conceptual correlation. In fact, Robert Provine has found that most instances of laughter simply punctate conversation rather than being triggered by humor (Provine 2000, 36-37).

These distinctions are crucially important for any investigation into humor – the question regarding what humor *is* is a distinct question from that of what makes us laugh, which are both distinct from questions related to activities, like the performance of comedy or joke-telling. Unfortunately, many theorists are unaware of or choose to ignore these distinctions, which result in theory-crippling category mistakes. As we will see, some historical theories which philosophers claim as theories of humor are not theories of

humor at all. Many are concerned primarily with laughter. Such is the case with Plato's account.

1.2: Historical Accounts

As we move chronologically through the theories, I have coupled theorists of different time periods with those early theorists upon whose work they improved. Thus, I have Plato and Hobbes together as the leading proponents of what we call the Superiority Theory, Aristotle and Aquinas together as Relaxation theorists, Sigmund Freud as Relief theorist, and Kant and Schopenhauer as Incongruity theorists. I end this section with Henri Bergson's 1913 account, which shares features with the previous accounts while being very much its own theory in scope, breadth, and content. I begin with Plato, as he is credited by many as developing the first philosophical theory of humor. This attribution, however, is false; Plato does not give us a theory of humor, rather he gives us a theory of laughter as it relates to a more general category: a very narrow version of comedy which mirrors that of popular Greek plays of the time.

a. Plato and Hobbes – The Superiority Theory

Plato and Hobbes are cited as the founders of what we now call *Superiority Theory*. The basic idea behind the theory is that laughter is caused by a feeling of superiority over another (Plato 48-50; Hobbes 1962). Notice that while this is considered a classic theory of *humor*, the focus is on the cause and nature of *laughter*. Nevertheless, we will take a charitable read of Plato and Hobbes, and assume that they are concerned only with that laughter which results from humorous stimuli. This caveat is not enough to

credit either with a theory of humor, but the analyses are fruitful to understanding the historical development of humor theory.

In the *Republic*, Plato writes that laughter is a sign of a disordered soul, and banned comedy in his ideal polis, arguing that it leads to power imbalances and the ideation of irrationality: "they mustn't be lovers of laughter either, for whenever anyone indulges in violent laughter, a violent change of mood is likely to follow" (Plato 388e). Interestingly, Plato's account of laughter is limited completely to the moral character of the *laugher* and offers little consideration to the cause for laughter external from the subject. In *Philebus*, for example, he mentions comedy as the occasion but focuses on the subjective experience of it rather than features of the performance which have caused that experience: "Now look at *our state of mind* in comedy. Don't you realize that it also involves a mixture of pleasure and pain?" (Plato 48a, emphasis added). From the effect of mixed pleasure and pain, he argues for the cause, claiming that all cases of laughter are cases of recognition of the self-ignorance of another:

> Socrates: What conclusions do you draw from this about the nature of the ridiculous?
>
> Protarchus: You tell me.
>
> Socrates: It is, in sum, a kind of vice, that derives its name from a special disposition; it is, among all the vices, the one with a character that stands in direct opposition to the one recommended by the famous inscription in Delphi.
>
> Protarchus: You mean the one that says, "Know thyself," Socrates?

> Socrates: I do. The opposite recommendation would obviously be that we not know ourselves at all. (Plato 48c)
>
> …
>
> Socrates: …All those who combine this delusion with weakness and are unable to avenge themselves when they are laughed at, you are justified in calling ridiculous. (Plato 49b)
>
> …
>
> Socrates: [I]n lamentations as well as in tragedies and comedies, not only on stage but also in all of life's tragedies and comedies, pleasures are mixed with pains, and so it is on infinitely other occasions. (Plato 58b)
>
> …
>
> Socrates: Now, what precisely do you think was the purpose for which I pointed out to you this mixture in comedy? Don't you see that it was designed to make it easier to persuade you that there is such a mixture in fear and love and other cases…for the body without the soul, for the soul without the body, for both of them in a joint affection, to contain a mixture of pleasure and pain. (Plato 50d)

The addition of the term "the ridiculous" could be understood as correlating to our use of the word humor, perhaps, with Plato drawing a connection between "the ridiculous", comedy, and laughter. However, the relationships between the three aren't clear. The ridiculous could be descriptive of both a category under which comedy falls and the character of a person, while comedy itself can describe both a state of mind and a performance. Laughter, it seems, must be that thing which is a direct result of

confrontation with the ridiculous and is always a sign of a disordered soul. The disordered soul reveals it's the malice toward another through laughter, exposing its failure to be properly, and thus morally, organized. When one laughs, you can be sure that she has allowed her soul to be governed by something other than reason.

Though Plato does give us a cause for laughter, particularly in *Philebus*, the account is clearly normative. The purely virtuous person will not laugh at the self-ignorance of another; to do so would be an expression of vice, of pleasure at the pain of another. For this reason, laughter for Plato is a vicious action. That which causes laughter, self-ignorance, is of course one of the worst sins one can commit for the philosopher. Furthermore, as Steven Gimbel argues, Plato most certainly believed that vicious laughter leads to tangible harm. Gimbel argues that Plato would have found the portrayal of Socrates in Aristophanes' popular comedy *The Clouds*, and the riotous laughter it produced, to be partially responsible for turning society against the philosopher and ultimately contributing to his death. Gimbel argues, "Humor…was surely seen by Plato as playing a part in the unnecessary and unjust death of one of the world's greatest thinkers. As such, humor is harmful" (Gimbel 2018, 8). Here we have yet another normative component – not only is self-ignorance a moral failing and laughter an indication of vicious character, but that which stimulates laughter can cause an infestation in the moral intuitions of a culture.

If the ridiculous is ultimately the category that we would call humor, then we can define humor as self-ignorance, the recognition of which leads to laughter, which signals to others an immoral character. When I demonstrate my lack of self-awareness, you laugh, and your laughter reveals two things: first, that I do not know myself, and second,

that you are a bit of a scoundrel for finding such a thing humorous. Scholars have understood this position as a Superiority account. When I recognize that you are self-ignorant, I laugh because I feel superior to you. But in laughing I show my own moral lacking, which is inferior to the ideal of a properly ordered soul. Perhaps I'm superior to you in that I am more self-aware, at least as far as I believe, but in laughing I am revealing an inferiority within my soul. This second aspect of Plato's view is often entirely absent from contemporary commentaries on the Superiority theory, either because it has long since been dismissed or because, for reasons expressed in the introduction, many theorists are content with "skimming off the top".

Hobbes is highly influenced by Plato, and while he agrees that laughter comes from recognizing inferiority in others, he does not claim that this is always reflective of a vicious character. For Hobbes the feeling of superiority is part of human nature, and as such it is a morally neutral trait. He writes in *Human Nature,* "the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly." (Hobbes 1994, 54). As Sheila Lintott notes, this is the single most cited passage for Superiority theorists (Lintott 2016, 353). He repeats this idea in *Leviathan*: "*Sudden glory* is the passion which maketh those *grimaces* called LAUGHTER; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves" (Hobbes 1962, 52. Emphasis in the original).

Hobbes' preoccupation is certainly with laughter itself, though he does give us a hint as to his view of what humor itself may be in the descriptive sense when he says,

"And forasmuch as the same thing is no more ridiculous when it groweth stale or usual, whatsoever it be that moveth laughter, it must be new and unexpected" (Hobbes 1994, 54). This has led some contemporary theorists, like Lintott, to insist that Hobbes is not a Superiority theorist after all but rather a brutish version of a Incongruity theorist (a theory we will explore later on). Insisting that what arouses laughter must be "new" and "unexpected" has no obvious connection to laughter as a sense of superiority, and need not; after all, given that humor and laughter are different things, it could be that what arouses laughter is distinct from what causes it. But because Hobbes' focus is on laughter, and not that new and unexpected thing that causes it, attributing a full account of humor to Hobbes from this single sentence would require taking a tremendous amount of liberties.

Because superiority for Hobbes is not necessarily morally abhorrent, it is consistent for him to claim both that laughter signals superiority and that laughter can occur without harm: "It is no wonder therefore that men take it heinously to be laughed at or derided, that is, triumphed over. Laughter without offence, must be at absurdities and infirmities abstracted from persons, and where all the company may laugh together" (Hobbes 1994, 55). That is, we can laugh without being cruel, such as when we can laugh at an idea or an imagined situation. As such laughter is not always a moral expression for Hobbes. In fact, contrary to much scholarship on the subject (see Morreall 1987, 2009), he claims that: "All actions, and speeches, that proceed, or seem to proceed from much experience, science, discretion, or wit, are honorable…Actions, or words that proceed

from error, ignorance, or folly are dishonorable" (Hobbes 1962, 76).[3] So here we have yet another position: that comedy (let's call it) that is witty is always honorable, and hence moral. Clearly Hobbes' take on humor is much more complicated (and inconsistent) than the blanket claim of Superiority theorist.

There are many cases of laughter that can be explained through this theory – the ways we bully others in middle school, popular "Fail" compilations on YouTube, even the first few episodes of any television reality talent show are all examples of finding humor in the inferiority or failings of others. The superiority theory has been long abandoned, though for reasons only tangentially related to the actual texts from which it originated. Certainly humor exists in circumstances in which social hierarchies/comparisons are not present, such as Francis Hutcheson's example of laughter when reading the works of great authors (Morreall 1987, 28). Oscar Wilde and Mark Twain make us laugh, but we would certainly not consider ourselves superior to either. We are also void of any comparative hierarchy when we enjoy puns. Finally, if superiority is all that we need for humor, then it should be the case that we find wild animals and injured or disfigured people funny. After all, we could consider ourselves superior to these groups in intellect or health, respectively, but Gimbel argues we instead feel with fear and pity, respectively (Gimbel 2018, 9).

While much more complex than contemporary humor theorists acknowledge, even a generous and in-depth reading of both Plato and Hobbes leaves us without a satisfying definition of humor. In the case of Plato's account, a charitable read of the

[3] This point is owed to a wonderful essay on the Superiority theory by Sheila Lintott 2016.

descriptive side (what defines humor as a category) is lacking. The recognition of self-ignorance in another does not always result in laughter as Plato claims. We can see plenty of counterexamples in which a person may be unaware of their own sophistication or talent yet are met with pity rather than laughter. Further, we often react to self-ignorance not by laughing, but by *cringing*. Distinct from both disgust and embarrassment, to cringe is to be terribly *uncomfortable* with the lack of awareness of the catalyst. When I cringe, I am neither laughing nor experiencing the sort of *Schadenfreude* cognitive state that Plato describes. I am emotionally uneasy, and at times viscerally upset. While some may laugh in these situations, such laughter is almost certainly due to the discomfort, not a feeling of superiority.

Hobbes's account, while historically misinterpreted, still lacks as a complete theory of humor. His insistence on the moral neutrality of humor requires accepting a metaphysic about human beings that is impossible to argue. Whether it is in the nature of the human being to feel joy at the revelation of her superiority over another, it is not obvious or necessary that this habit is one that is morally neutral. Furthermore, as Hobbes' himself notes, there are many kinds of laughter that do not fit into his scheme, including the laughter of infants, laughter at puns, and contact laughter (laughing at the laughter of someone else). If we were to charitably expand Hobbes' theory into a theory of humor proper, we would be struck with a flood of counterexamples that would nullify it. Should we try to expand upon the passing comments regarding "new" and "unexpected", we will find ourselves in similar troubles as we will find later on when we examine the incongruity theory, the most basic being that oftentimes new and unexpected

things are traumatic or frightening. Lintott summarizes the value and limits of the superiority theory as follows:

> Rather than defining humor per se, the superiority theory explains the nature and value of *some* humor, allows us to distinguish among the experiences of different *kinds* of humor, and articulates some issues and debates concerning the ethics and etiquette of some humor. But despite how obvious the proper role of the superiority theory is upon contemplation, the theory is often presented as defending superiority as a stand-alone comprehensive theory of humor. (Lintott 2016, 348, emphasis added)

Not only do its so-called figureheads describe theories which cannot be neatly wrapped in the package of the basic superiority thesis, neither provide us with any sort of account that could be considered a complete theory of humor. To present the Superiority theory as an account of humor originated by Plato and Hobbes is not only a category mistake, it is a misattribution that betrays superficial analyses of the source texts.

Regardless of the overwhelming dismissal of the theory, some contemporary scholars have held tight to it, translating this theory of laughter into a theory of humor, and going "all in" on the basic superiority claim that all humor, whether or not it produces laughter, stems from the recognition of superiority. Charles Gruner, for example, claims that humor itself is a game consisting of winners and losers. He writes, "Humorous situations can best be understood by knowing *who* wins *what*, and *who* loses *what*…[this is the] nuts and bolts of the 'laugh/win' theory" (Gruner 1997, 9 emphasis in the original). The winner of the game is the one who is laughing, while the loser is the

butt of the joke. Laughing is a declaration of victory, and being laughed at is a sure sign of defeat. Humor, for Gruner, is simply the revelation of the triumph of one over another. Unfortunately, Gruner's account is susceptible to many of the same counterexamples offered above. After all, it is difficult to prove that an infant is reveling in his win over another when that infant has not yet developed the intellectual capacity to understand himself as distinct from his surroundings.

b. Aristotle, Aquinas, and Meredith – Relaxation Theory

Aristotle is at times tossed in with Plato and Hobbes as advocating a superiority theory of humor (see Smuts 2009), but this read requires ignoring all discussions of wit in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Of course, we would have a much better understanding of Aristotle's take on humor had the second half of the *Poetics* survived – instead we are left with a single quote which the superiority camp claims as their (only) evidence: "Comedy…is an imitation of people who are worse than the average… The ridiculous, rather, is a species of the ugly; it may be defined as a mistake or unseemliness that is not painful or destructive" (Aristotle 1449a). Here Aristotle seems to assert that ugliness expressed through humor can make one recoil, but it does not have any practical power or influence beyond this. Aaron Smuts puts Plato and Aristotle in the same camp when it comes to humor even while recognizing that their theories are not as simple as often described:

> Rather than clearly offering a superiority theory of humor, Plato and Aristotle focus on this common comic feature [malice], bringing it to our attention for ethical consideration… However, if we evaluate the weaker version of the superiority theory—that humor is often fueled by feelings of

> superiority—then we have a fairly well supported empirical claim, easily confirmable by first hand observation. (Smuts 2009)

Certainly the above quote from *Poetics* includes similar condemnation of humor's vicious elements found in Plato, but this is not Aristotle's only word on the matter.

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle tackles the subject explicitly, calling "wit" a virtue when used in accordance with practical wisdom, and a vice when either excessive or deficient:

> Those who carry humor to excess are thought to be vulgar buffoons, striving after humor at all costs…while those who can neither make a joke themselves nor put up with those who do are thought to be boorish and unpolished. But those who joke in a tasteful way are called ready-witted, which implies a sort of readiness to turn this way or that. (1128a5)

Clearly for Aristotle there are good and bad ways to use humor, like any other virtue. But interestingly, those bad ways, as expressed in the *Poetics*, are incapable of creating any negative, real world effects. Since Plato sees no room for virtue in humor, and Aristotle does, I find it much more appropriate to place his account alongside what many refer to as the Relaxation Theory. The idea behind this theory is that humor in moderation is necessary to survive the depressive perils of life. Both Aristotle and Aquinas consider humor valuable insofar as it fits snuggly within an appropriate mean between excess and deficiency, albeit for different reasons.

Aquinas's view in *Summa Theologica* mirrors Aristotle's in *Ethics*; there is an appropriate amount of humor that ought to exist in human life, and failing to maintain this amount is (for Aquinas) a sin. Aquinas' argument, however, is for the necessity of

pleasure through play – not laughter or humor – and this pleasure is what he calls "humorous":

> Now just as the weariness of the body is dispelled by resting the body, so weariness of the soul must needs be remedied by resting the soul…the remedy for weariness of soul must needs be consist in the application of some pleasure, by slackening the tension of the reason's study…Now suchlike words or deeds wherein nothing further is sought than the soul's delight, are called playful or humorous. Hence it is necessary at times to make use of them, in order to give rest, as it were, to the soul. (Aquinas Q. 168, Art. 2, 296-297)

Refusing this solace is simply irrational for Aquinas, and irrationality is sinful. We find solace in activities "wherein nothing further is sought than the soul's delight" – this definition of humor ignores the possibility that humor could be vicious. This account is concerned with relaxation for the soul, and with a virtuous character, but does not consider the moral value of the stimuli.

The person with the virtue of humor (or play), is "said to be pleasant through having a happy turn of mind, whereby he gives his words and deeds a cheerful turn: and inasmuch as this virtue restrains a man from immoderate fun, it is comprised under modesty" (Ibid. 298). He further insists that "play is necessary for the human intercourse of human life" (Ibid. Art. 3, 300), for "[i]t is against reason for a man to be burdensome to others, by offering no pleasure to others, and by hindering their enjoyment" (Ibid. Art. 4, 302). A person who is 'without mirth, not only is lacking in playful speech, but is also burdensome to others, since he is deaf to the moderate mirth of others. Consequently they

are vicious, and are said to be boorish or rude" (Ibid.). Such boorish folks are irrational to Aquinas, because they overburden themselves with their refusal to engage in play.

The idea of a "happy medium" in playful temperament is also seen in George Meredith's "An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit" (1877). Meredith believes there are three kinds of humor-related vices, categorized as follows: non-laughers, laugh-haters, and excessive laughers. He describes "non-laughers" as "men who are in that respect dead bodies, which if you prick them do not bleed" (Meredith 5); but these are better than a laugh-hater, who "learns to dignify his dislike as an objection in morality" (Ibid. 6). Excessive laughers are "so loosely put together that a wink will shake them", for "to laugh at everything is to have no appreciation of the Comic of Comedy" (Ibid.). Meredith, like Aristotle and Aquinas, float between categories throughout the text, from the sense of humor as expressed exclusively through laughter, as seen above, to particular "comedic gifts" such as wit, to the social impacts and functions of genres (Greek comedies in particular). Yet always there is a normative underlying element; wit, he says, is "warlike…quick to flash out upon slight provocation, and for a similar office – to wound" (Ibid. 7). Wit is only "harmless", he writes, in the hands of a fool. Yet, from the personified perspective of English Comedy herself, he says, "Morality is a duenna to be circumvented" (Ibid. 8). Here we see the hints of both Aristotle's and Aquinas' theses: it is hard work to be rational, and thus virtuous. Even the saintliest among us need to relax lest they become so exhausted that she is incapable of continuing. We must "get around" the chaperone of morality, and we do this through engagement with humor.

While the so-called superiority theories are falsifiable, the relaxation theories cannot be translated universally. Clearly humor is tied to morality for Aristotle, though,

as he tells us later in the *Ethics*, the possibility of virtue is only attainable for the "well-bred", "educated", "tactful man" (1128a20). Even if we were to grant the liberty of translating his account into a moral theory of humor, it cannot be universal as it automatically and specifically condemns the ill-bred, uneducated, tactless, and female. For Aristotle, such people are only capable of making vicious jokes, those in which "the jest is a sort of abuse" (1128a30). If we want to dismiss the language of sex and social standing, we still end up with a problematic account, as there seems to be a contradiction between the moral and practical impact of comedy in *Poetics* and wit in *Nicomachean Ethics*, to which there are two possible conclusions: either comedy and wit are the same thing, humor, and Aristotle's account is internally inconsistent; or, comedy and wit are two different things and there are no consistency issues, and humor is a third thing. In this case, these passages tell us very little about that third thing in a descriptive sense, and even less in a normative sense. In either case, the theory fails to represent an acceptable, unified theory of humor. Thus, not only are there plenty of examples of harmless jokes made by those who fall within the specified outcast groups, choosing to look past this language (which requires a charitable reading) leaves us without a descriptive account of what humor *is* beyond the moral effect it could have on one's character. Avoiding this charge would require us to accept internal inconsistency.

Aquinas' version of the account escapes such accusations, and maintains a moral consistency: because the soul needs to relax, it is imperative for human beings to satisfy this need. Engaging in humor (defined as exclusively "soul-delighting") relaxes the soul, and refusing to do so is to intentionally harm one's soul. To intentionally harm one's soul is irrational and sinful. Perhaps accurate as an account of ideal moral character, it is not a

complete account of humor. First, the account is concerned with the moral aspect alone, and does not offer any sort of normative claims regarding humor itself. Second, an account of character or character trait is not an account of humor. Last, given that it is difficult to account for a relaxed versus tense soul, this theory is far too broad. Even if we accept this theory as a moral theory of humor, it could be used to explain everything we find relaxing, not just humor, with no means of falsifiability. While the theory claims objectivity, any verification of its truth would be subjective, which would lead to a relativistic breakdown of its moral value. If I feel my soul relax while watching comedy, but he relaxes while doing drugs and listening to music, and she relaxes by mocking children, who is to say that any of these activities is morally problematic? On Aquinas' account, it seems like all would be virtuous if done in moderation. Well enough, as far as character goes, but humor is lost here.

Finally, Meredith's account, while above only detailed in terms of the moral dimension, is not an account of humor itself. The most general that Meredith's account gets is an analysis of "Comedy" in the sense of the genre of stage writing. While he does not limit the account to only Greek comedy (as is common for scholars of comedy), it could not qualify as a universal account of the genre, let alone as a foundation for a universal account of humor, as it suffers from both Euro- and androcentrism. He claims that each of the major European powers have specific kinds of comedy, English comedy being the best of course, while "Eastward you have a total silence of Comedy…There has never been fun in Bagdad" (Meredith 1877, 21-22). His claim is not that there is no possibility of comedy for other races, but rather that Comedy is tied to freedom, and insofar as certain races of people do not value freedom, those races will lack Comedy:

"where they have no social freedom, Comedy is absent" (Ibid. 22). This is demonstrably false. Certainly, there are countries in which humor, and specifically comedy, are not state sponsored, not available through the media, and/or is punishable by death, as we have seen throughout history (see Youssef 2017, for example). But this does not mean that the people themselves, within their communities and amongst each other, are completely void of humor. Even those in the most horrific and imprisoned circumstances, such as concentration camps in WWII, maintained their humor and even continued putting on comedic performances, albeit away from the eyes of the Nazi guards (see Lipman 1991).

For Meredith, despite what seem best attempts, women remain objects of study, not quite human, but more complex than your average creature; he spends quite a bit of time in this text praising comedies such as "The Misogynist" (Meredith 1877, 17) and uses several analogies to negative feminine traits in his explanations. But, at one point, he makes the following delightfully curious declaration: "But where women are on the road to an equal footing with men, in attainments and liberty…pure Comedy flourishes" (Meredith 1877, 22). Since his essay is aimed at Comedy, it would be unfair to claim that Meredith fails at presenting a unified theory that he is not in the business of presenting. He does offer, for the sake of comparison, a few words on humor that seem not only divorced from the virtue-based moral understanding of comedy earlier, but is also much closer in kind to a Superiority theory, which is thoroughly incompatible with the idea that humor could ever be virtuous. He writes: "If you laugh all around him, tumble him, roll him about, deal him a smack, and drop a tear on him, own his likeness to you and yours to your neighbor, spare him as little as you shun, pity him as much as you expose, it is a

spirit of Humour that is moving you" (Ibid. 28). This insight gives us a version of the Superiority theory that is subject to the same objections as the others, and thus cannot be considered a successful theory of humor.

c. Freud – The Relief Theory

Sigmund Freud writes a treatise on laughter that is attractive both to comedians and comedy lovers: laughter, he argues, is the socially acceptable way we relieve the pressure of built up sexual and aggressive energy (Freud 2002, 142). In *The Joke and their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud argues that this is the reason that most of the jokes we tell are sexual or aggressive – unconsciously we are distracted by these impulses, and it would be inappropriate to act on them (138). When we do express ourselves and are met with social disapproval, we try to excuse ourselves by claiming that we weren't serious, we were just joking, and by doing so hope to distance ourselves from the moral responsibility of the utterance (129).

The clear problem with this theory is that it is a theory of laughter, through and through, which makes unfalsifiable claims regarding the psychological state of the laugher. It tells us nothing about humor. Freud himself acknowledges this in *Humor*, where he attempts to broaden his account of the physiological activity of laughing to an account of a "sense of humor" or "humorous attitude" (Morreall 1987, 112). Freud seems to glide easily between using the term "humor" and "humorous attitude"; presumably these indicate the same thing, as he differentiates "humor" from play (116), wit (115), and the comic (111). He argues, "the essence of humor is that one spares oneself the affects to which the situation would naturally give rise and overrides with a jest the possibility of such an emotional display" (1987, 112-113). In other words, a person who

has a humorous attitude is one who refuses to allow the seriousness of life to penetrate his emotional state in the ways in which it ordinarily would. A humorous attitude seems to be the necessary subjective condition for humor to exist, though he is not explicit about this distinction (112).

He continues his examination of humor by saying:

> humor has in it a *liberating* element…It insists that it is impervious to wounds dealt by the outside world, in fact, that these are merely occasions for affording it pleasure…Humor is not resigned, it is rebellious. It signifies the triumph not only of the ego, but also of the pleasure principle, which is strong enough to assert itself here in the face of the adverse real circumstances. (Morreall 1987, 113, emphasis in the original)

Here we can see that he has not shifted focus very much from *Jokes*. Laughter is now related to humor and a humorous attitude, but both continue to only tell us about the psychology of the subject experiencing humor. This is expected, of course, as this is what Freud is in the business of exploring. He seems to be claiming that the person who chooses the humorous attitude, and is thus capable of expelling her pent up psychological energy through laughter, is one who has developed the ability to emotionally detach from the pain of living and replace that pain with pleasure. Purely descriptive, it paints humor as a defense mechanism but makes no normative assertations.

Variations of Freud's relief theory are echoed by many in the comedy business (see Chapter 5 for detailed examples). The psychological and existential relief that people find in humor is well documented, both in professional studies and self-reporting, and is often cited as the reason why jokes should be exempt from moral judgment. Indeed, there

is much here that is intuitively true – it is the case that laughter can provide psychological relief, that finding pleasure in pain can be a way to cope with hardship, and that people often excuse themselves from the responsibility of offending others by claiming that they meant no harm and were not intending their behaviors or utterances to be taken seriously.

Intuitive as it may be, however, this revised theory of Freud remains incomplete as a theory of humor. We learn nothing about how an object ought to be organized if it is to be found humorous. As for what it tells us about our psychological state, there is not much by way of explanatory power. Humor is implied as something that requires anxiety, stress, or unsettledness as preconditions for humor and understood as an effective defense against those emotional states. As we will see in Chapter 5, this perspective has led many to argue that humor does not participate within the moral world; that is, insofar as humor is a means to the end of relieving stress and defending against despair, it (whatever it is) should be immune from moral judgment. Furthermore, this account insinuates that one who is without such despair would be incapable of creating or recognizing humor – if I do not need the relief, then the humorous attitude is unnecessary, and couldn't even arise since I lack the emotional precondition needed to deploy. But this is wrong – plenty of at-ease people adopt humorous attitudes. As Sheila Lintott argues, the connection between a comedian's ability to be funny does not rely on that comedian's psychological damage (forthcoming in *The Dark Side of Stand-Up Comedy*) or ability to combat that damage by replacing their pain with pleasure. Ultimately, Freud's theory cannot answer the metaphysical and ethical questions of humor.

d. Kant and Schopenhauer – The Incongruity Theory

Many scholars credit Immanuel Kant with the Incongruity theory. Kant speaks of laughter in a remark which closes the first section of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (5:332-5:335), where he writes,

> In everything that is to provoke a lively, uproarious laughter, there must be something nonsensical (in which, therefore, the understanding in itself can take no satisfaction). **Laugher is an affect resulting from the sudden transformation of heightened expectation into nothing**. This very transformation, which is certainly nothing enjoyable for the understanding, is nevertheless indirectly enjoyable and, for a moment, very lively. The cause must thus consist in the influence of the representation on the body and its reciprocal effect on the mind; certainly not insofar as the representation is objectively an object of gratification (for how can a disappointed expectation be gratifying?), but rather solely through the fact that as a mere play of representations it produces an equilibrium of the vital powers in the body. (5:333, emphasis in the original)

Taking this quote in two sections, we see first why Kant is considered the father of Incongruity theory, though in the second half we have something much more akin to a physiological "relaxation" theory (a "relaxation" of the body rather than a "relaxation" of the soul a la Aquinas). Let's take first things first.

Kant argues that laughter is the direct effect of unfulfilled expectation. We see this often in jokes – the setup is meant to build up the expectation and anticipation in the audience, while the punchline ought to surprise. This would be why, according to Kant, if a joke is poorly setup such that the punchline is obvious, very few people will find it

funny (though some may greet it with a polite laugh). When the punchline is contrary to what we expected it to be, according to Kant, the anticipation is frustrated, and, having no other way to release the energy, we laugh – this is the second part of his claim. Kant supports this "frustrated expectation" thesis with a series of jokes which poke fun at Indians and the English, claiming that what makes us laugh is "not because we find ourselves cleverer than this ignorant person…but because our expectation was heightened and suddenly disappeared into nothing" (5:333). Notice his clear objection to a superiority account. He goes on to say, "Note that it must not be transformed into the positive opposite of an expected object – for that is always something, and can often be distressing – but into nothing" (5:333). Humor does not give rise to superiority or relief, but *nothing*.

The second half of the claim is that we laugh to regain equilibrium – the tension of expectation with no release leaves us in wont of something to stabilize us, and the way in which we once again find balance is through laughter. Again, it could in fact be the case from a physiological standpoint that laughter is the mind or body's way of regaining harmony (it is not falsifiable after all, as mentioned earlier), but it tells us nothing about humor itself. What we have in Kant is a descriptive account of the psychological effect an object of humor can have on human beings that causes them to laugh. Whatever humor is, it is momentarily deceptive – and something happens internally when we are confronted by humor – we perceive an incongruity between what we expected and what was the case. The effect of this cause "produces weariness, but at the same time cheerfulness (the effects of a motion that is beneficial to health)" (5:334).

We are missing elements from this account that are necessary to form a complete theory of humor: a description of humor itself, or, what about the objects' organization is called "humorous" rather than something else. We are also missing any connection between humor and laughter and humor and morality. When it comes to humor and laughter, we know that frustrated expectations cause laughter but many other things also cause laughter, and sometimes laughter isn't accompanied by anything at all, as discussed in the introduction (Provine 2000: 37). And of course, frustrated expectations may cause a host of reactions other than laughter, like anger, annoyance, or sadness, but not nothing. When it comes to humor and morality, one could argue that laughter is healthy and healthy is good, therefore laughter is good, but there are plenty of times when laughing is an activity which harms another, or, to keep our argument within Kant's framework, when laughing at someone is to treat them as an object rather than as an end in herself. Therefore, we cannot make the claim that all laughter is moral even if we did have the missing tie between humor and laughter in Kant's account. Furthermore, physical good and moral good are two very different categories, particularly for Kant. A lie may prevent a beating which would harm one's physical health, but it is still a morally abhorrent choice to make.

Kant's account, then, is incomplete both as a descriptive account and a moral account of humor. Schopenhauer improves upon implicit understandings in Kant and introduces the term "incongruity" from which the theory is named (Schopenhauer 1995: I.13). Schopenhauer addresses several important features necessary for a theory if it is to be successful. First, he distinguishes between laughter as psychological and laughter as physiological, and is concerned here with the former, making this theory far better suited

to be understood as a theory of humor rather than one of laughter (Schopenhauer Kindle Loc 1482). Second, it succeeds in being both broad enough to cover multiple instantiations of humor and being narrow enough not to be descriptive of every psychological state. In other words, it can account for changing and evolving cultural humor while at the same time being specific enough to be falsifiable.

For Schopenhauer, laughter is caused by an incongruity between reason and sentiment: "This very incongruity of sensuous and abstract knowledge…is the cause of a very remarkable phenomenon which, like reason itself, is peculiar to human nature, and of which the explanations that have ever anew been attempted, as insufficient: I mean *laughter*." (Schopenhauer Loc 1426, emphasis in the original). As the formal ground of what is now the most well accepted theory of humor across disciplines, I will quote his explanation in length:

> The cause of laughter in every case is simply the sudden perception of the incongruity between a concept and the real objects which have been thought through it in some relation, and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity. It often occurs in this way: two or more real objects are thought through *one* concept, and the identity of the concept is transferred to the objects; it them becomes strikingly apparent from the entire difference of the objects in other respects, that the concept was only applicable to them from a one-sided point of view. It occurs just as often, however, that the incongruity between a single real object and the concept under which, from one point of view, it has rightly been subsumed, is suddenly felt. Now the more correct the subsumption of such objects

> under a concept may be from one point of view, the greater is the ludicrous effect which is produced by this contrast. All laughter then is occasioned by paradox, whether this is expressed in words or in actions. This, briefly stated, is the true explanation of the ludicrous. (Schopenhauer 1995: 76-77).

Schopenhauer goes on to say that the ludicrous is of two types, either wit or folly. Wit is when we intentionally misappropriate the same concept to two (or more) different objects. Folly is when we treat two or more different objects as if they were the same, until one reveals itself as fundamentally different. In other words, "everything ludicrous is either a flash of wit or a foolish action" (Ibid. 77), and thus "wit must always show itself in words, folly generally in actions, though also in words, when it only expresses an intention and does not actually carry it out, or when it shows itself merely in judgments and opinions." (Ibid. 78). Schopenhauer's theory, though short, also takes up the species of humor most difficult for other theories to account for: the dreaded pun. He says, "Just as witticism brings two very different real objects under one concept, the pun brings two different concepts, by the assistance of accident, under one word" (Ibid).

The main issue with Schopenhauer's account is of course that he connects laughter with humor as if they are the same category. We may understand the "ludicrous" as humor for Schopenhauer, but then we have the problem of humor being confined, in this understanding, to either verbal wit or foolish action. While it's unclear how precisely Schopenhauer defines wit and foolishness, the distinction itself tells us that they are descriptive of different things. Foolishness, recall, can be in both words and actions "when it only expresses an intention and does not actually carry it out, or when it shows

itself merely in judgments and opinions". But this cannot explain the humor in the hit television show and movie franchise *Jackass*, in which the foolish action (such as voluntarily taking a sledgehammer to the groin) is talked about and *then carried out* and it is the carrying out that makes it funny (Tremaine 2000). It is the fact that the cast performs the foolish action that makes the show funny, even when the audience knows 1) that it is foolish in conception and more foolish in action, and 2) that someone is going to get hurt. Schopenhauer's account cannot explain this phenomenon.

Regardless, many contemporary theorists take up incarnations of Schopenhauer's theory (though often crediting Kant instead) and, when aware of the category mistake, adapt the focus to humor. Incongruity theory has enjoyed widespread popularity and revisions to the present day. For example, Noël Carroll summarizes the contemporary understanding of the theory as follows: a person will find something humorous if the object of their mental state is a "perceived incongruity" which is enjoyed "precisely for their perception of its incongruity" (Carroll 2014, 37). He continues, "Incongruity itself can be expressed in a multitude of ways: what I perceive is *absurd* based on normal behaviors, what I perceive is *unusual* based on my previous experience with that perception, what I perceive is a *non-sequitur*, what I perceive *does not belong*, etc." (Ibid.). Contemporary theorists have reached general agreement that some modification of the incongruity theory has the most potential for a universal account. Among those who support variations of the Incongruity theory are Noël Carroll (2014), John Morreall (2009), and Victor Raskin (2008).

If we take the path of these Incongruity theorists and replace laughter with humor, we get a more charitable read of Schopenhauer's account – though both the original and

updated forms suffer from similar problems. The most common objection to incongruity theories is that they cannot explain why I would find a joke (or a pun, to speak directly to Schopenhauer) funny when I have already heard it. Furthermore, what about when my expectation is met; for example, when I know that the man is about the slip on the banana peel, such as in the case of practical jokes? There is no incongruity here. The problem may be, according to Smuts, that the originators of the Incongruity and other theories had no intention of giving us a complete theory of humor itself:

> The standard analysis, developed by D. H. Monro, that classifies humor theories into superiority, incongruity, and relief theories sets up a false expectation of genuine competition between the views. Rarely do any of the historical theorists in any of these schools state their theories as listing necessary of sufficient conditions for something to count as humor, much less put their views in competition with others. (Smuts 2006)

It could be the case, in other words, that the previous analyses had all been intended to describe some things that happen when we experience humor, and that those insights were misinterpreted or misappropriated by contemporary scholars for the purposes of scaffolding more complete theories on their foundations. This understanding, of course, does not give Schopenhauer or any other theorist a pass for a problematic theory. Schopenhauer's incongruity theory falls victim to many of the same objections and problems as its contemporary instantiations.

e. Henri Bergson, 1913

I consider Bergson's account as an important break from tradition in classic theories of humor. He is clear and modest in his mission, stating that because humor has

been created by human beings: “the comic does not exist outside of the pale of what is strictly *human*” (Bergson 1913, 3, emphasis in the original). It cannot simply be reduced to one particular definition. Bergson understands humor as an abstract concept in and of itself, which he refers to as “the comic spirit”. “We regard it, above all, as a living thing,” he writes, “…For the comic spirit has a logic of its own, even in its wildest eccentricities. It has a method in its madness” (Bergson 1913, 2). Bergson understands that, whatever the comic spirit is, it is intrinsic to human life and reflected *and formed* through and by social interaction. Bergson emphasizes that in understanding humor, we are uncovering neglected truths about human experience:

> It dreams, I admit, but it conjures up in its dreams visions that are at once accepted and understood by the whole of a social group. Can it then fail to throw light for us on the way that human imagination works, and more particularly social, collective, and popular imagination? ...should it not also have something *of its own* to tell us about art and life? (Bergson 1913, 2-3, my emphasis)

There is much here with which I agree, though for different reasons, and will explicate in chapter 3. Importantly, Bergson is the first philosopher in this list who acknowledges the information which can be mined from a study of humor, the intricate ways in which humor entwines itself with everyday life, and the power of humor and our experience with it.

Bergson’s theory, while beginning with strong distinctions, conflates terms throughout, ultimately offering a theory that combines elements of the Superiority (“Laughter punishes certain failings…laughter cannot be absolutely just. Nor should it be

kind-hearted either. Its function is to intimidate by humiliating" [Bergson 1913, 198]), Incongruity ("*A comic effect is always obtainable by transposing the natural expression of an idea into another key*" [123], emphasis in the original), and relaxation/relief theories ("there is in laughter a movement of *relaxation*… For a short time, at all events, we join in the game. And that relieves us from the strain of living" [195-196], emphasis in the original) theories. And indeed, he acknowledges that some previous studies of humor may contain within them "some portion of the truth" while being incorrect as a whole – another point, as we will see later, in which I agree (181). There is something to be said in favor of each theory, as if the theorist has indeed hit upon a truth but could not find it again to follow to its natural conclusion.

The most insightful claim of Bergson's theory is his differentiation of humor and art (150). Humor, according to many comedians and critics, is best understood as an art form alongside ballet, painting, and musical composition (Kondabolu 2014a; Engel 2016; Davis 2009). Bergson and I agree that humor, the broader category of comedy, cannot be reducible to art, and that art is something else entirely, serving an entirely different function. More on this in Chapters 3 and 4. Though regardless of the powerful insights Bergson does give us, the totality of his theory is unsatisfying. First, Bergson ties the social to the moral in humor in such a way that there can be no humor that is amoral. He claims that the comic finds itself in "rigidity" of the physical and/or psychological comportment of others (Bergson 1913, 138). Insofar as being rigid is to be unsociable, he argues, the person is behaving "absentmindedly" and thus irrationally. But this seems too quick an argument as rigidity, unsociability, absentmindedness and irrationality can all be independent of each other, and independent of humor. (Isn't the rigid the one who is most

present-minded, insofar as she micromanages?) Second, he claims that emotions have no role in the comic: “The comic, we said, appeals to intelligence pure and simple; laughter is incompatible with emotion” (139). This seems to contradict our experience, particularly when confronted with the laughter of infants who have not yet developed the mental apparatus to engage in intellectual social reflection, not to mention feelings of joy, pleasure, or love which fill us from time to time when engaging in humor.

Unfortunately, the best of Bergson’s insights have been overlooked by some and rejected by others. As we end this section and begin the next, very few of these key elements of Bergson’s theory will reappear, though, of all the accounts in the history of humor theory, Bergson’s is the one that has the most in common with my own. The way in which he understands humor as “living”, as having its own “logic”, as something which can be both true and false dependent upon perspective, and as something that is not reducible to art are ideas I will defend in Chapters 3 and 4.

1.3: Contemporary Accounts

Michael Clark may be the first philosopher to attempt an *explicit* conversion of theories of laughter into theories of humor in 1970. From this time forward, theorists began to take more seriously the distinctions between humor, types of humor (such as wit and pun), jokes, and laughter. It is for this reason that I begin the contemporary accounts with his essay. As we will see, most of the contemporary theories, whether philosophically or empirically based, can be considered as some modified version of an Incongruity theory. Here, too, the specialization of purely descriptive or purely normative theories becomes clearly articulated.

a. Clark and Morreall – Revised Incongruity Theories

Clark's 1970 essay, "Humor and Incongruity", draws attention to the impulse by some theorists to dismiss theories of laughter as insufficient theories of humor based solely on their *own* (that is, the dismissing authors) category mistakes, as well as the "reflex response of some philosophers to dismiss the search for essences as misconceived" (Clark 1970, 20). He summarizes and dismisses the classical theories of humor, and puts forth his version of the incongruity theory which is, in short, that humor necessarily requires one to find an incongruity or seeming incongruity amusing (Clark 1970, 21), for, "nothing can (logically) amuse someone *unless* he sees it as incongruous, that seeing it as incongruous is a necessary condition of his finding it humorous" (Clark 1970, 22).

Roger Scruton objects to Clark's definition in his essay "Laughter" (1982), claiming that one counterexample to the theory is the amusement one experiences when he sees a highly accurate caricature of someone – what amuses us is the *congruity*, not the incongruity (Morreall 1987, 156). Mike W. Martin also challenges Clark's theory in 1983, claiming that there are plenty of cases when we can enjoy incongruity, such as in irony, without being amused by it (Morreall 1987, 172). Clark's theory is clearly not without challenges, but is invaluable in its insistence that we make, and stick to, our distinctions when theorizing. Any philosopher of humor worth her salt must take such care.

As mentioned in the introduction, the contemporary go-to resources on the philosophy of humor have been produced by John Morreall. Morreall offers a theory of humor in 2009 in which laughter plays a key role. He argues that the basic pattern in

humor is that 1) "we experience a cognitive shift" while 2) in a "play mode", which 3) we "enjoy" and 4) our "pleasure at the cognitive shift is expressed in laughter" (Morreall 2009, 50). The notion of a cognitive shift is familiar from the incongruity theory, and Morreall's definition falls directly in line, but the term of a "play mode" is new to our analysis. When in a play mode, one approaches the world non-seriously. It is this play mode which allows us to enjoy cognitive shifts rather than become alarmed by them. According to Morreall, by telling a joke "we allow our audience the luxury of dropping the concerns they ordinarily have about comparable real situations" (Morreall 2009, 53). Transition into the play mode, he concedes, may be blocked by lack of physical distance or passage of time from the topic of the joke – jokes about 9/11, for example, are not humorous to some New Yorkers and Americans while they are for others (Morreall 2009, 53). Outside of such cases, play mode is an automatic mood signaled by those things we typically associate with non-seriousness.

Because we are in play mode, we experience amusement or enjoyment, the third step in the pattern. Something is only humorous if we enjoy it, as "it is social, exhilarating, and liberating" (54). Morreall contends that humor cannot exist when one is alone. In this section he skates between solo laughter and solo amusement/enjoyment without acknowledgment – this is to his benefit, as scientific research has shown the likelihood of solo *laughter* in humans and primates is rare, and Morreall's account includes laughter as a necessary effect (Provine 2000, 92). Solo amusement does not include imagined interactions between peoples, Morreall clarifies, such as when reading a book or watching a movie; in these cases the individual may be alone in a room, but the amusement is social in that it is interactive with human artefacts intended to produce

amusement (Morreall 2009, 55). The amusement is *exhilarating* in that we are mentally engaged rather than passively receptive, and it is *liberating* in that it allows the mind to wander to places it has not felt able or permitted to explore outside of a play mode (reminiscent of Freud) (2009, 56-57).

The most problematic aspect of Morreall's theory is his claim that in order for a cognitive shift within a play mode that is pleasurable to be called humor, it must be accompanied by "a natural tendency to laugh" (2009, 58). Here is where Morreall's account breaks down. The initial breakdown of his pattern for humor states "Our pleasure at the cognitive shift is expressed in *laughter*, which signals to others that they can relax and play too" (2009, 50; emphasis in the original). He later softens his claim to simply "an *inclination* to laugh" (2009, 59; emphasis added). He moves the goal posts again in rebuttal to a series of objections from Carroll when he claims that *smiling* is sufficient: "smiling can be a warm-up for laughter", he claims, and so his theory holds (2009, 63). Ultimately, Morreall dismisses Carroll's objections (Carroll 2003, 355) to the laughter caveat of this theory by saying:

> There simply is no single concept of humor and no single concept of amusement for which we can list necessary and sufficient conditions…I think the best we can do is to explain the ways that 'humor' and 'amusement' have been used, and analyze paradigm cases that fit under most standard usages of these terms. A search for necessary and sufficient conditions would be futile. (2009, 64)

This is unsatisfactory. If we are to take Morreall at his word that he is giving "*the* basic pattern in humor" (2009, 49; emphasis added), and each of the four aspects he lists are

part of that pattern, then we should be able to say that, so long as the basic pattern holds, we have humor. While he does not want to describe this as necessary and sufficient conditions, what else could we rightly call them? He allows for variances in extremity, but the form holds; why go to such lengths to save the final step, laughter, if it is not part of a necessary and sufficient criteria?

Provine's research, the very research Morreall relies upon, is clear: "laughter punctuates speech", and "humor-based approaches are of limited relevance in understanding most laughter" (Provine 2000, 36, 43). More explicitly, "'Funny' is not an adequate explanation of laughter" (Provine 2000, 46). Given the empirical reality, we cannot support a theory which claims that humor is humor only insofar as it results in laughter. Humor cannot explain laughter, and laughter cannot be an indication of humor. An account which insists on either is not only conflating a physiological event with a psychological one, but is scientifically contradicted.

b. LaFollette and Shanks – Epistemological Theory

From an epistemological perspective, a refined version of the incongruity theory which focuses particularly on the role of belief in humor is what I will call the Belief Based Theory. Hugh LaFollette and Niall Shanks present their theory (henceforth referred to as the BBH Theory) in a 1993 article called "Belief and the Basis of Humor". Humor, they say, is not only the ability to set high and low level beliefs at odds, but the ability to contrast one's own belief sets (whether it be the entirety or simply a portion) against the belief set of another. The authors refer to this action as a "flickering", a rapid vacillating back and forth between the belief sets: "this flickering in the focus of attention – this active oscillating between these different but related belief sets – is humor" (La

Follette and Shanks 1993, 333). This accounts for a great deal of variety in responses to a single stimulus, depending on the belief sets of the subject. In cases where subjects have cognitive limitations or disabilities they lack the rich hierarchy in belief necessary for flickering to occur, and/or the ability flicker may be impaired (330). The ability to flicker may also be impaired when the subject matter of the joke is too psychologically raw for the subject, or if the subject is in an intervening physiological or psychological state, such as experiencing heightened anxiety or depression (330). If one's ability to flicker is impaired, the cognitive process necessary to recognize humor is impossible.

This version of the incongruity theory focuses more explicitly on the role of knowledge in humor than others. It can explain why I cannot find a joke about Alex Jones humorous if I have no concept of Alex Jones, and it can explain why inside jokes are completely vacuous to those not "in" on the joke. We cannot, however, reduce humor to epistemology. I can know about Alex Jones and flicker between his belief set and my own and not experience humor. I can also flicker between my current belief set and a former belief set and feel shame rather than amusement. Does this mean that I have an interfering cognitive state? Or does it simply mean that I have learned more about the world and have developed a view that makes the former shameful? The authors aim to get around this point by specifying ideal circumstances in which the subject experiencing the flickering is someone with a sense of humor, who "has a disposition to a certain type of cognitive behavior – the flickering – which constitutes the humorous response to appropriate stimuli" (333). But then, what is appropriate stimuli in this ideal case? The authors do not say. Indeed, what this theory ultimately offers is a descriptive account of the cognitive state of the subject, and the necessary and sufficient epistemological

conditions within that subject, that allows her to experience humor. Humor is defined as the *act* of flickering, which implies that humor is all within the mind. But recall, the flickering is only humorous insofar as the subject has "a sense of humor", and this is undefinable: "there is no such thing as a sense of humor *simpliciter*…what we find humorous depends on what other beliefs we have" (336). But this contradicts their earlier claim that the flickering *is* humor. The theory gives us quite a bit to work with, but ultimately is missing an explanation for those cases in which I, with my sense of humor, flicker, but am not experiencing humor, other than my experiencing some preventative state. But what of the stimulus? It is flickering itself, and what makes one activity of flickering funny and another not is purely subjective.

c. Hurley, Dennett, Adams – Evolutionary Theory

Matthew Hurley, Daniel Dennett, and Reginald Adams offer evolutionary origins of humor in their 2011 study *Inside Jokes*. The authors argue that early humans were often engaged in risky behaviors in the search for food or shelter, and we took for granted the safety of those actions based on prior experience (Hurley et. al. 2011, 12). For example, if every time I have stepped into a river it has only been knee high, it would not occur to me that *this* river *this* time could be deeper than I am tall. For survival purposes, we needed to develop some sort of mechanism that would delay our action long enough for us to rethink or reconsider our behavior. Whatever this mechanism, it needed to operate quickly, be capable of competing with other stimuli, and reward us for paying it mind. The reward, the authors contend, must be something both immediate and strong, perhaps even addictive, in order to succeed in stopping us dead in our tracks. In other words, whatever mechanism our brains developed to slow us down before we leapt into

the river needed to be powerful and distracting enough to interrupt our activity and give us a chance to consider or reconsider. Humor, they claim, began as this mechanism, and has since developed into an epistemological safe guard which rewards us for discovering errors which could have, in our earliest existence, resulted in dangerous consequences (13). While this initial mechanism would have looked nothing like it does today, contemporary humor retains elements of this mechanism: "it is not incongruity in a stimulus that causes humor; it just happens to be the case that incongruity in a stimulus often plays a part in the discovery of a faulty mental space and its deconstruction" (293). So incongruity may or may not be the cause of the effect called humor as we now experience it, but it sometimes is, and when it is, it assists us in recognizing error.

These insights are valuable to our scientific understandings of human social evolution. But as a theory of humor, science cannot give us the whole story. There are no normative elements here, or any understanding of humor as cultural, as it reduces the human being to a biological creature. It is not that the account is wrong (though it is impossible to prove, of course, given that one cannot verify through empirical evidence a theory about evolutionary development), it is that the account is incomplete. A significant element of the human social world is our moral world, and the methodology of Hurley et. al. simply is not interested in considering this element.

What science can tell us is the following: they are hesitant to make claims about elusive categories like humor and stick to investigating what will yield measurable data, like laughter (Provine 2000; Gervais and Wilson 2005). The evolutionary and scientific consensus is that *laughter* developed before language, as a social cue, typically associated with rough-and-tumble play, but humor is intangible. We can see "proto-humor" in

chimpanzees, but there is no evidence that these mammals have anything more developed that we could describe as humor (Provine 2000, 94-95). Hurley et. al. have found that incongruity sometimes correlates with humor but is not itself humor, contrary to Carroll and other Incongruity theorists. For these authors, humor is defined as "one part of the emotional mechanism that encourages the process that keeps data integrity in our knowledge representation" (Hurley et. al. 2011, 289). Humor is thus equated with "epistemic emotions" that we have developed and adapted for the purposes of "knowledge maintenance" – humor being only one of many aesthetic activities which performs this role (289).

d. McGraw and Warner – Benign Violation Theory

Psychological theories of humor incorporate empirical testing to better understand what makes a subject understand a phenomenon as humorous. Peter McGraw and Caleb Warner ran experiments, detailed below, to test the hypothesis of their incongruity-inspired theory: Benign Violation (McGraw and Warren 2010, 1142). They argue that three conditions must be present for humor recognition: first, "a situation must be appraised as a violation", second, "a situation must be appraised as benign", and third, "these two appraisals must occur simultaneously" (1142). For example, when I see someone slip on the ice and fall, I am witnessing a violation. At the same time, I see that the fall did not cause any serious harm, and therefore is benign. Both of these truths occur to me immediately, and I find it funny. In other words, solving a previous worry of the incongruity theory, whatever the unexpected violation, it must have some element of safety to be considered humorous rather than traumatic. This is why, they argue, we will find it funny when we see someone fall, but only if the person is not seriously hurt.

There are three ways a violation can become benign and thus funny, according to our authors: first, if it is considered acceptable by another social norm; second, if one is "only weakly committed to the violated norm"; or third, if one has psychological distance from the violation similar to that described by LaFollette and Shanks (McGraw and Warren 2010, 1142-1146). Contra to LaFollette and Shanks, McGraw and Warner claim that a lack of psychological distance removes the benignity from the equation, leaving only a violation which cannot be humorous.

The authors tested their theory as follows: subjects were asked to check one of three boxes after reading a phrase: Box 1: "Behavior is wrong", Box 2: "Behavior made me laugh", or Box 3: "Both" (McGraw and Warren 2010, 1146). The phrase of the control version was either entirely benign or entirely violating by conventional social norms. An example of a benign, or control, phrase was: "The servers and bartenders at a wedding earn *extra tips* when the mother of the bride walks up to the bar and casually *drops a ten-dollar bill* in the tip jar". The associated violating phrase was: "The servers and bartenders at a wedding *are denied* tips when the mother of the bride walks up to the bar and casually *pockets the money* in the tip jar" (1143, emphasis in the original to indicate the words that differed between versions). In the first case, no one marked the first or third boxes, and only three percent of participants marked the second; the behavior (dropping a ten-dollar bill in the tip jar) was not viewed as wrong, and it also made only a very small portion of the participants laugh. The violating phrase, on the other hand, resulted in 94% of participants marking the behavior as wrong, 32% indicating that laughed at the behavior, and 29% indicating both. These findings are

consistent throughout all the control and violation phrases, leading the authors to conclude that wrong behavior, insofar as "no one is getting hurt" we could say, is funny.

This theory can tell us only about social norms. The study does show that behavior considered wrong is more likely to make people laugh than behavior that is not considered wrong. However, the phrasing of this study is problematic if we're looking for guidance regarding humor: participants in the study are being asked whether the phrase made them *laugh*, not whether they found the phrase *humorous*. Since the production of laughter is not correlated with the experience of humor, the study tells us much about the former, but little of the latter. Plenty of people may have found a phrase "funny", but didn't actually laugh at it. Plenty laughed, but out of discomfort, anxiety, or disgust, as we so often do (Provine 2000, 28-29). This study also tells us more about the surveyed populations' understanding of moral right and wrong than it does about humor.

e. Conclusion

This concludes our journey through historical and contemporary accounts of humor across disciplines. We are left without a unified account of humor, though it has certainly offered us interesting perspectives and valuable considerations. Historical philosophical theories of humor tend to confuse the topic under debate, and contemporary attempts to update, refine, or evolve those theories have yet to provide us with a theory of humor that can answer the question of what humor is and what normative role it plays in human life. Contemporary empirical perspectives, whether evolutionary or psychological, can give us information about subjective responses to humor, chronological developments of humor in the human species, or general perspectives on moral norms. And while no theory is complete, none should be completely disregarded. We need both

the philosophical and empirical approaches to get closer to the whole story. Empirical science gives us the data that we must explain with our theory of humor, and philosophy implores us to ensure such a theory has the metaphysical foundations to explain humor's role in our sociopolitical lives.

The task now, then, is to find out whether it is possible to take the productive elements of each theory and unify them into a cohesive, complete understanding of humor. For this task, I turn to Marburg Neo-Kantian Ernst Cassirer, for Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms insists on the engagement between philosophy and empirical science to develop greater and greater understandings of the human experience and is self-conscious of, and careful to avoid, Eurocentrism (as we will see in Chapter 2, section III.c.) (Cassirer 1944a 80).

CASSIRER'S PHILOSOPHY OF SYMBOLIC FORMS

2.1: Introduction

In the last chapter I showed that the philosophy of humor is riddled with conceptual confusions and incomplete analyses. I will argue in Chapter 3 that we can solve the problems of humor theory by embracing the methodology of the Neo-Kantian philosophy of culture of Ernst Cassirer. The current chapter will serve to 1) introduce the reader to Cassirer and the methodology behind his philosophy of culture, 2) to provide a sketch of Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, and 3) to highlight key features of his philosophy of culture that serve as justification for my choice to use his methodology.

2.2: Ernst Cassirer and the Methodology of the Marburg School

In this section I will introduce Ernst Cassirer, his philosophical history, and his place and influence within the Marburg School.

a. Ernst Cassirer, 1874-1945

Ernst Cassirer began his philosophical career as a Kantian scholar and philosopher of history, writing a great deal on the history of philosophy with critical attention to the Enlightenment and Renaissance periods. His work ranged from studies of Plato to criticisms of Hegel. He was deeply invested in reading canonical works from a contemporary lens, arguing that we gain insight into our lives and political realities by interpreting the thinkers of the past to inform our current situations (Cassirer 1944a, 158; Lofts 2000). He spent rich intellectual time in Hamburg, collaborating with Erwin Panofsky and Aby Warburg, eventually settling at Yale University (Levine 2013).

A Jew, Cassirer was forced to leave Germany in 1933 due to the rise of the Nazi regime. While enjoying recognition in Europe, he spent the remainder of his life in near obscurity; his works were not well known in America, and by the time his philosophy gained traction in one university he was already off to another, never staying in one place long enough to establish a firm reputation (though, if Lewis Gordon is to be believed, Cassirer's estate continues to fund the graduate student alcohol budget). It has only been in the last 40 years that Cassirer's works have been rediscovered and Cassirer himself understood as an innovative original thinker (Verene 1979, 7). His final works, two of which were written in English, focused on the political ramifications of political myth, and the responsibility of philosophy and philosophers to rise up against it:

> Cassirer was deeply convinced that it was this specific neglect which prevented philosophy from doing its duty in the Nazi era: because philosophy did not demonstrate the strength of reason, there could be no conviction that reason is a strength and a power, that reason can indeed can shape a whole world. Instead of this, common distrust in reason delivered a whole culture into the hands of prophets and propagandists, preaching only the strength and the power of emotions, of blood, of destiny and the great leader. (Schwemmer 2004, 8-9)

It was the historical reality witnessed firsthand that gave Cassirer's late philosophy its unique normative urgency – this feature will be explicated in greater detail later in this chapter. Cassirer died in New York City in April 1945, mere weeks before the death of Hitler and the surrender of Germany (Jensen 2018).

b. The Methodology of the Marburg School

Despite its contemporary reputation as concerned with forwarding critical explorations of science and reason, it is clear from revisiting the founding texts of the Marburg school that this is not all that concerned these philosophers. Following Sebastian Luft's extensive study of these texts, the true goal of the Marburg School was in fact to create a critical philosophy of culture in the spirit of Kant's critique of reason, to move beyond the focus on science to a consideration of all aspects of human expression:

> Kant should have expanded his philosophy into a critique of culture as a critique (justification) of *all* sciences with respect to *all* cultural formations. The seeds for a flourishing of the critique of reason into a critique of culture were readily available in Kant, though not seized upon by its founder. (Luft 2015a, 63)

Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was only one part of the human story, and understanding the rest would require a different methodology altogether. Cassirer writes in the introduction to the first volume of his *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*:

> general epistemology, with its traditional form and limitations, does not provide an adequate methodological basis for the cultural sciences…Instead of investigating only the general premises of scientific *cognition* of the world, it would also have to differentiate the various fundamental forms of man's "understanding" of the world and apprehend each one of them as sharply as possible in its specific direction and characteristic spiritual form. (Cassirer 1955a, 69)

Thus, not only was science not the end-all for the School, for Cassirer blind allegiance to its methods would never be capable of telling the whole story of humankind. These

points will serve as evidence for the pluralistic, horizontally ordered interpretation of the philosophy of symbolic forms that I argue for in section (c).

Cassirer was not alone in his interest in the cultural sciences. While the figureheads of the Marburg school Hermann Cohen and Paul Natorp spent a great deal of time writing about science, the journal *Logos*, founded in 1910 by a collaborative effort between younger scholars in the Marburg and Southwest schools, stated their goals as follows: "What is required is to elevate into philosophical consciousness the entire fullness of the motives that are present and driving in culture" (as quoted in Luft 2015a, 31). Luft also cites Cohen's *Logic of Pure Cognition* and Natorp's *General Psychology According to the Critical Method* as texts which show the limits of a focus on science alone and the need to expand to other areas of human expression. Here the representatives of the Marburg School quite explicitly state the need to move beyond Kant to develop a broader analysis of humanity (Luft 2015a, 36, 82). Attention to these texts confirm the broader goal of the school itself:

> The Marburg School of Neo-Kantianism stands for a philosophy of culture. Its concept of philosophy is transcendental philosophy in the tradition of Kant. Its thesis is that a proper treatment of culture can only occur from the standpoint of critique. Its project consists in a transformation of the Kantian critique of reason into a critique of culture. (Luft 2015a, 1)

I follow Luft's position in *The Space of Culture,* where he persuasively argues that Cassirer "most successfully" carries out this project of the Marburg School (Luft 2015a: 28).

It is the methodology of the Marburg school, modeled by Cassirer, which makes his critique of culture unique: it insists that philosophical investigations be grounded in the actual world, the objective "facts" of what we sense and the data we collect, while understanding that these facts are always mediated through subjective, embodied interpretation, even in the hard sciences: "The work of all great scientists…were not mere fact collecting; it was theoretical, and that means constructive, work" (Cassirer 1944a, 220). Cassirer insists on this method. Verene explains Cassirer's position as follows, "…philosophy has duties to man as a knower as well as man as a social animal, that investigation into technical problems of knowledge and perception must be harried on side by side with philosophical investigation of social life" (Verene 1979, 11). The philosopher of culture must not only collect empirical clues as to humanity's activities and inspirations, but interpret them to discover their *meaning* in the human story (Cassirer 1944a, 69). Thus, there is always an objective and subjective element in the reconstruction that is a critical philosophy of culture.

2.3: Philosophy of Culture as the Philosophy of Symbolic Forms

In this section I will give an account of the philosophy of symbolic forms as a critical philosophy of culture, and argue for an interpretation of Cassirer's position as pluralistic rather than hierarchical.

a. A Critical Philosophy of Culture

Symbolic forms are the moving pieces of culture. I will first summarize what a philosophy of culture is and the role symbolic forms play in culture. I will follows with a more detailed explanation of symbolic forms in the next part.

No critical philosophy of culture can get off the ground less culture be recognized as intrinsic to humanity. Culture does not exist without human beings to create it. It is a dynamic process, not a static given. What distinguishes human beings from animals is their work, Cassirer says, and it is this guiding principle which frames his entire philosophy of culture:

> Man's outstanding characteristic, his distinguishing mark, is not his metaphysical or physical nature – but his work. It is this work, it is the system of human activities, which defines and determines the circle of "humanity". Language, myth, religion, art, science, history are the constituents, the various sectors of this circle. A "philosophy of man" would therefore be a philosophy which would give us insight into the fundamental structure of each of these human activities, and which at the same time would enable us to understand them as an organic whole. They are held together by a common bond…this bond is a *vinculum functionale*. It is the basic function of speech, of myth, of art, of religion that we must seek far behind their innumerable shapes and utterances… (Cassirer 1944a, 68)

This analysis requires us to both collect all of the "data" we can and interpret that data in a way that gives us a human story, the story of what this data *means* to humanity: "It is obvious that in the performance of this task we cannot neglect any possible source of information," he writes. "We must examine all available empirical evidence, and utilize all the methods of introspection, biological observation, and historical inquiry. These older methods are not to be eliminated but referred to a new intellectual center, and hence

seen from a new angle" (1944a, 68). This "new angle" is not an idealism from on high, rather, it is a perspective grounded in objective reality, "the properly 'human' world" (Ibid.), but always with an eye toward the purpose of that activity: "In our study…the problem of meaning takes precedence over the problem of historical development" (1944a, 69). The subjective activity of interpretation must always be grounded in the objective reality of that which is interpreted. This interpretation must not consist in a mere listing of facts, but an interpretation of what these facts mean and represent in human life. It is upon this foundation that Cassirer builds his philosophy of symbolic forms. These symbolic forms are unique, objectively sharable perspectives – objective frames through which our subjective interpretations are stabilized. The world is mediated through our culture, which Cassirer calls our "work" (Cassirer 1944a, 68), and it is only through culture that we can understand our world as a meaningful world. Within this understanding, there is a crucial social and normative element. Each symbolic form has a particular function that plays its part in working toward the ideal that guides culture itself: liberation. This need of spirit to "show itself" through our work is normatively driven:

> the 'worthiness of happiness' is what culture promises to man and what it alone can give him. Its goal is not the realization of happiness in this life but the realization of freedom, of that genuine autonomy that consists not in the technical mastery of man over nature but in man's moral mastery over himself. (Cassirer 2000, 104)

Insofar as culture is the externalization of the spirit of humanity – it is something created and sustained by human beings – it goes through ebbs and flows. We both generate culture and are influenced by culture, whatever that culture may be. Culture's abstract

telos is the realization of autonomy, but humanity, in all our efforts, often takes three steps back for every two steps forward. Culture is the struggle of humanity toward a normative end, and that struggle may not move directly forward. Culture aims toward normative progression, always looking toward an end but never positing the particulars of that end, but does not necessarily take a measured, forward march (Cassirer 1944a, 70). More on this later in this chapter.

b. The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms

Our activity, our human story, is riddled with struggle, but this does not negate the philosophical unity found in a critique of our culture. This unity is to be found in the symbolic forms. To define this term, let's take it piece by piece, starting with the former. Appealing to his Kantian training, *form* recalls the forms of intuition explicated in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, space and time, upon which our experience depends. Just as we cannot think or experience the world outside of space and time, Cassirer claims can we cannot think or experience the world outside of *symbolic* forms. He names these as language, myth, and art, but is clear that this list is not exhaustive. Certainly time and space remain as essential, but "organic space and time" cannot tell us everything about the human world (Cassirer 1944a, 42). "Rather than investigate the origin and development of perceptual space," he writes, "we must analyze *symbolic space*…the *space of action*" (Ibid. 43).

Forms are *symbolic* insofar as they are concentrated with a myriad of *meaning*. There are *reasons* that humanity acts, and there are intentions behind the creative, dynamic processes through which spirit is expressed. This is what distinguishes a *symbol* from a *sign*:

> Symbols – in the proper sense of the term – cannot be reduced to mere signals. Signals and symbols belong to two different universes of discourse: a signal is a part of the physical world of being; a symbol is a part of the human world of meaning. Signals are "operators"; symbols are "designators". Signals, even when understood and used as such, have nevertheless a sort of physical or substantial being; symbols have only a functional value. (Cassirer 1944a, 32).

Symbolic forms, then, are forms through which we understand the world as a meaningful world in which we live and act. These forms are never static but always in motion insofar as we express ourselves, in all our individual diversity, through them (c.f. Luft 2015a, 167; Hendel 1955, 50-51, 53, 58-60).

Only human beings engage with symbols, and as such this is a distinguishing feature of humanity. "Man lives in a symbolic universe," Cassirer explains,

> Language, myth, art, and religion are parts of this [symbolic] universe. They are the varied threads which weave the symbolic net, the tangled web of human experience. All human progress in thought and experience refines upon and strengthens this net. No longer can man confront reality immediately; he cannot see it, as it were, face to face… Instead of dealing with the things themselves man is in a sense constantly conversing with himself. He has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythical symbols or religious rites that *he cannot see or know anything except by the interposition of this artificial medium*. (Cassirer 1994, 25, emphasis added)

In other words, the condition for the possibility of culture itself is the symbol. That is, the externalization of spirit (which is culture) is only possible because of the *symbolic forms* through which we make meaning. The meanings through which we understand the world are immediately given – we never confront an object void of these meanings, we impose them automatically and inevitably, and through them we create a shared world of understanding.

Perhaps the clearest example of how we interact with the symbolic forms is Cassirer's own:

> We start with a certain perceptual experience: with a sketch that we see before us, which we grasp in a certain manner as an optical structure, as a connected whole. Here we can first direct our gaze purely sensual "impression" of this sketch: we grasp it, for instance, as a simple serpentine line…But while I am still given over to the impression of this simple perceptual experience… all of a sudden the sketched line begins to take on a life of its own, as it were from within. The spatial formation becomes an aesthetic formation. I grasp in it the character of a certain *ornament*, which is linked up for me with a certain artistic meaning and an artistic *significance*… And once again the form of the observation can change…can reveal itself as the bearer of a mythical-religious meaning. The moment I grasp this meaning not only externally and in reflection, but as it seizes me inwardly, as I live and exist in it, the new formation that I see before me is fulfilled and saturated with a new meaning... While the aesthetically contemplating and savoring individual gives himself over to

> the intuition of the pure form, where to the religiously touched person a mystical meaning is disclosed in this form; the form that stands before one's eyes can serve for thought as an example of a purely logical-conceptual nexus…Where the aesthetical digestion of viewing perhaps saw Hogarth's Line of Beauty, the mathematician's gaze sees the image of a certain trigonometric function, e.g., the image of a sinus curve, while the mathematical physicists sees in the same curve the line of a periodic wave. We seek to express this systematic nexus such that we conceive of this sensual basic experience as taken up into different "*symbolic forms*" and as determined and formed through them…For us it is clear that the "sensual" and "meaningful" are given to us, purely phenomenologically, always only as an undivided unity. We can never extract the sensual as such, as mere "raw material" of sensation, from the totality of the meaningful contexts as such: But we can well demonstrate how the sensual forms itself… differently and how it "expresses" and signifies something different according to the respective *standpoint* in which it is viewed. (Cassirer 2015, 256-257)

Unpacking this example gives us the following understanding of symbolic forms: 1) objects are always symbolically constituted, 2) the perspective with which one confronts the object determines the way in which the object is understood, 3) one object can represent a number of forms simultaneously or chronologically, depending on the perspective of the *viewer,* and 4) the condition for the possibility of understanding the object at all is to understand it as representative of a symbolic form.

1) An object is always already symbolically constituted: When we confront an object, we do not (and indeed, cannot) see it "in the raw", or without immediately understanding it as *something*. This parallels the insistence of Husserl that our understanding our consciousness is always "consciousness-of" (Husserl 1965, 90). Insofar as humans are symbolic beings, objects have always been endowed with meaningful symbols. Cassirer refers to this phenomenon as a "symbolic pregnance": "It is this ideal interwovenness, this relatedness of the single perceptive phenomenon, given here and now, to a characteristic total meaning that the term 'pregnance' is meant to designate" (Cassirer 1957, 202, cited in Verene 1979, 31). Donald Verene explains, "no matter what standpoint consciousness takes toward the object, its sensory experience leads directly to a determinate order of meaning. Thus Cassirer claims that any perceptive act is 'symbolically pregnant'" (Verene 1979, 30). In other words, no matter what gaze I take when I look at the line, it will always be symbolic in one sense, and the individual thing I confront stands for the entire form. For example, a mathematical equation is an individual but also stands in for the symbolic form of science.[4]

2) Cassirer's line presents itself immediately as understood as some *thing*, and indeed, can represent a variety of *things*. The *thing* that it is in any given moment leads us to the second point: the symbols that are expressed in the object are determined by the symbolic perspective from within which we confront them. The artist sees the line differently from the mathematician, just as I see objects different dependent on my perspective at a given time. Were I to see this line in an art museum, I would understand the object as representative of art, and I would judge it according to the aesthetic criteria.

[4] My thanks to Sebastian Luft for pressing and clarifying this point.

Were I an artist, I may hold this perspective outside of the museum as well, and find aesthetic beauty in any number of objects which I encounter.

3) However, my confrontation with the line from within the form of art is fundamentally different from my confrontation of it when I view it from within the form of myth or religion. The object is the same, but the meaning it has for me has shifted along with my symbolic perspective. I no longer judge the line in terms of art, but instead by the criteria of the mytho-religious formation. In other words, the *meaning* with which I *intend* to the object changes the *meaning* the object *has* for me. Cassirer's line can represent *both* an artistic object and a mathematical formula: "each of these is a particular way of seeing, and carries within itself its particular and proper source of light…For it is not a question of what we see in a certain perspective, but of the perspective itself" (Cassirer, 1946: 11).

4) Finally, the line is only understood as an object because of the meaning endowed within it from symbolic formations, regardless of which formation is most immediate. The line *means something*, even if that thing is radically different from one perspective to another.

Insofar as our culture is created and expressed through the symbolic forms, a proper philosophical understanding of culture requires a critical analyses of these forms. As Oswald Schwemmer argues, "Symbolic forms are ways of intellectual shaping. Using them or, better, intellectually moving in them, we produce and are confronted with fixed forms of expression, worlds of images and concepts which define our culture" (Schwemmer 2004, 7). There is no scenario under which a human being can be in the world and function outside of the confines of symbolic forms.

Symbolic forms, then, are understood as those lived categories of human expression that act as the condition for the possibility of knowledge as such; that is, objects of experience can only be experienced insofar as they are understood through a form. A single object, such as a tree, can represent any and all symbolic forms, and the form it takes will depend upon the form within which we are operating. If I am operating within the form of myth, for example, I will understand the tree as, e.g., a representation of divinity or the spirituality of nature. If I am operating from within the form of biological science, I will understand the tree as part of a complex ecosystem. As an artist, I understand the tree as beauty represented in nature. The tree itself, of course, remains the same; it is my *confrontation* with the tree that changes depending upon the internal structures of the form from within which I confront that tree. In other words, my perspective dictates the form for which a given object will stand as a representation. There is no such thing, Cassirer insists, as a "perspectiveless" perspective. I may not necessarily be attuned to the form from within which I am operating, but I cannot operate outside of one. As Luft summarizes:

> The *symbol* is *not* merely a special form of *linguistic* meaning in which *Poiesis* [Natorp's terminology, replaced by Cassirer with the term "spirit"] is revealed, but *every concrete real thing* is a concrete *symbol* of something ideal, of a meaning. Things *make sense*, because they *instantiate* meaning; the latter is not understood as a Platonic form, but as something more basic, neither something ideal (in the sense of Plato), nor something lawful (in the sense of Cohen). The symbol is the concrete (individual) *as (always already) endowed with (general) meaning*, and

> hence *Poiesis* as energy of the spirit in the form-giving energy of the symbolic *in each individual case,* resulting in a symbolic form. (Luft 2015a, 127-128, emphasis in the original)

In more ordinary language, "Culture as a symbolic reality is another way of saying that the world is *meaningful*" (Luft 2015a, 163). Culture is the result of humanity's striving for the discovery, expression, and reconciliation of meaning.

c. Plurality of Forms and Rejection of Cultural Hierarchy

While I explained culture for Cassirer in section (a) as pluralistic through and though, there is debate within contemporary Cassirer scholarship as to whether Cassirer describes his symbolic forms as being "horizontal" or "vertical"; that is, whether we should understand each symbolic form as having equal importance and value in human life, as I have presented, or whether some symbolic forms are merely steps along the way to higher, more sophisticated forms (see Matherne 2016). The latter interpretation has been argued by reference to Cassirer's use of the term "primitive" when describing myth, for example. They argue that symbolic forms go through stages of development from expression to representation to meaning; this is consistent with Cassirer's critique. They argue that this development of a symbolic form is evidence for a hierarchy of the forms themselves, with myth on the bottom as something humanity ought to mature beyond, and science reigning on high as the liberated form. The final part of the hierarchy argument is that, because language and myth are the first forms of expression, the forms dependent upon them must be "higher" on the ladder. The closer we come to abstract meaning, the more human we are. Because science deals with abstracted laws and numbers, it must be understood as the form toward which humanity is ultimately striving.

The teleology of humanity upon which Cassirer has insisted demands a telos, and that telos, they argue, places reason above all other symbolic forms. Language and myth are primitive, while science and reason are cultured. Samantha Matherne summarizes the hierarchy argument here:

> if Cassirer is committed to there being a purpose to culture, then it seems he is thereby committed to a teleological picture of culture. And this teleological picture would, in turn, provide grounds for ranking certain symbolic forms over others if they enable us to progress closer towards this goal…[math and science] put us in a position to become conscious of the relations by means of which we organize the world, and given these relations are expressions of our freedom, mathematics and science thereby enable us to increase our consciousness of our freedom, hence advance culture in a crucial way. Since a symbolic form like myth does not do this, but rather gives us the illusion that we are passive with respect to the world, then Cassirer would have reason to say, as he does [in the third volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*] that mathematics and science are the highest rungs on the ladder of culture. (Matherne 2016).

Thus the existence of a hierarchy within the symbolic forms can be found both within the texts themselves, and within the very idea of a human telos. Matherne contends Cassirer cannot maintain both that human culture has a teleological end and that the symbolic forms work in a horizontal equilibrium to strive for that end.

This interpretation is wrong. While my arguments in favor of the horizontal interpretation are scattered throughout this dissertation; here I'll address the issue head-

on. Cassirer does not embrace a hierarchy within symbolic forms. First, when Cassirer refers to myths as "primitive", he is not referring to a hierarchy but rather a chronological progression. Our symbolic life begins in myth, and within the forms there are several stages of progression, from expression to representation to meaning: language begins in expression of what is right in front of us, pointing out an object and representing it. In the second stage language represents relationships between the subject and those things external to her. In the final stage, language abstracts meaning from the subject or the particular object to the objective, universal concept. "Thus language proceeds from expressive meaning to pure representative meaning and from this it is constantly directed towards the third realm of pure significance" (Cassirer 2015, 260). While the stages point to *progression* in complexity, they do not claim a normative or even descriptive superiority. The progress is chronological, not teleological. Even if the meaning stage is "better" than the expressive stage, a progression *within* a symbolic form has nothing to do with a progression *of* symbolic forms.

If context of the text is not sufficient, Cassirer's method itself also displays a horizontal intent. Cassirer is explicit is his condemnation of philosophers and anthropologists who "demote" cultures based on a flawed understanding of "what counts" as rationality. This impulse begins first with the misunderstanding of human nature – as we have already explained, human beings are not "rational animals" but "symbolic animals". Reducing human nature to a particular understanding and criterion of rationality betrays a perspective that already places science as the highest, and most human, quality, thus arguing in a circle. In direct opposition to this position, Cassirer quotes anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski: "It is a mistake to assume that, at an early

stage of development, man lived in a confused world…In his ritual of magic or religion, man attempts to enact miracles, not because he ignores the limitations of his mental powers, but, on the contrary, because he is fully cognizant of them" (Cassirer 1944a, 80). This is contrary to Matherne's interpretation of myth as a passive form. In his own voice, Cassirer confirms this understanding: "Myth and primitive religion are by no means entirely incoherent, they are not bereft of sense or reason. But their coherence depends much more upon unity of feeing than upon logical rules" (1944a, 81). He continues to say that the ability of the "primitive man to grasp the empirical differences of things…very often proves his superiority to civilized man" (1944a, 81). Clearly Cassirer is challenging the ordinary use of the terms "primitive" and "civilized" here – being civilized has nothing to do with being rational.

Cassirer stresses the normative import of understanding symbolic forms as horizontal in his later works, particularly *The Myth of the State*, where he pleads with us to recognize the organization of the symbolic forms. One *must* understand each form by its own internal logic. One form must never position itself as superior to another; to do so would be to set oneself up for failture: "It is no longer a matter of simply deriving one of these phenomena from the other, of 'explaining' it in terms of the other – for that would be to level them both, to rob them of their characteristic features" (Cassirer 1946, 9). This interpretation is shared by Luft and Lofts: "The artistic view is not 'better than' or 'superior to' the mathematical apprehension" (Luft 2015a, 167). Lofts confirms: "The parts do not exist prior to the whole, and cannot be understood outside their place and function in the whole. For Cassirer, 'human life is an organism in which all elements imply and explain each other'" (Lofts 2000, 19).

A correct interpretation of this aspect of the philosophy of symbolic forms is crucially important for Cassirer's own work as well as our current study. Positing a hierarchy of forms, Cassirer knows, give philosophical justification for denying humanity to certain groups. This is precisely the sort of error that Cassirer believes is in part responsible for the rise of the Nazi party. To claim that a race, country, practice, or religion is "below" another is, for Cassirer, the danger of allowing a mythical construction to overcome other forms in cultural consciousness. This hijacking of myth by politics to the end of oppressing or aggrandizing a group is specifically condemned in *Myth of the State*, "Judaism and the Modern Political Myth" (1944b), and "The Technique of Our Modern Political Myths" (1945), to name a few. To quote Lofts' reading of Cassirer's work during the Second World War: "It has become increasingly evident that no one culture can provide us with the ideal token or form of humanity, but rather that there is a myriad of expressions of humanity, each of which possesses its own dignity and intrinsic value." Cassirer recognizes and celebrates a "multicultural culture", "a culture that has as its identity the unity of a plurality of different and autonomous cultures, an identity that is at once inclusive and exclusive of difference" (Lofts 2000, 3-4). More on the normative demand of an understanding of the nonhierarchical nature of forms will follow in the next section.

The entirety of Cassirer's final work aims to dismantle and disprove the idea that there exist primitive cultures that ought to be destroyed for the good of humanity. Were Cassirer to believe that there is indeed a hierarchy of forms, that there are forms that represent the pinnacle of human achievement, that the form of science is the form within which we should all strive, and that we should move beyond the others, he would not

have taken such pains in his later years to make clear the plurality of the forms. Art and myth are just as important and worthy of respect as science and reason (see Luft 2015a, 168-169). While he fears myth taking over other symbolic forms, myth itself, Cassirer claims, is not going anywhere. It need not, as its *existence* does not threaten culture but enliven it: "the manifold character of the meanings of being do not stand in contradiction to the demand for the unity of being. It is this manifoldness that actually fulfills the demand for this unity" (Cassirer 2015, 263). The danger comes not from the form of myth itself, but from the weaponizing of myth by politics.

Finally, the looming reputation of the Marburg school may have biased the reading of Cassirer. Cassirer is not in the business of creating a foundation for knowledge of science; he is, as stated, in the business of undertaking a critical philosophy of culture, which neither begins nor ends in the scientific perspective (Cassirer 1944a, 21). Teleology does not necessitate a step ladder. The symbolic forms are in conflict, to be sure, insofar as culture is heterogenous and human beings pursue different ends. While a thoroughly united humankind may be an impossible ideal, this does not mean that there isn't a unified end toward which culture strives: "If the term 'humanity' means anything at all, it means that, in spite of all the differences and oppositions existing among its various forms, these are, nevertheless, all working toward a common end" (Cassirer 1944a, 70). This common end is an ethical one, an ideal of freedom (Cassirer 1944a, 100-101). Science cannot bring us to freedom alone, as it only gives us insight to a fraction of what it means to be a human being. It takes creative expressions from all symbolic forms to move humanity forward.

The symbolic forms work together toward this goal:

> Mythology itself is not simply a crude mass of superstitions or gross delusions. It is not merely chaotic, for it possesses a systematic or conceptual form…it offers us *part of the whole*. For *side by side* with conceptual language there is an emotional language; *side by side* with logical or scientific language is the language of poetic imagination. (Cassirer 1944a, 25. Emphasis added)

Science is not leading the charge, and there is no justification for placing science over and above myth, or vice versa. Science and myth both give us unique and irreducible meanings and expressions of the human story – to disregard one in favor of another would be to intentionally disregard a crucial element of that story, undermining the goal altogether. Charles W. Hendel, to whom *Essay on Man* is dedicated, makes this clear in his introduction to the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*:

> Which of the two is being assimilated to the other, the logical forms of cognition to language, myth, history, art, religion, or these forms to forms of knowledge? The answer now is that this way of putting the question does not really do justice to the situation, for it is not a case of subordinating one to the other but of mutual assimilation or even, to use an expression of Cassirer's, an 'interpretation' of the forms. Organized thought in its scientific form is an expression of man's spirit and in that aspect as a *mode of expression* it is one among many other cultural forms. (Hendel 1955, 46, emphasis in the original)

If this is not a clear enough message to those trapped within a scientistic framework, later in the introduction Hendel takes on the topic directly, writing, "Each formation of

construction must be evaluated according to its own criterion of satisfaction. It has its own autonomy of form. Hence there is no privileged status for science over art or any other symbolic formation which constitutes some kind of interpretation of experience" (Hendel 1955, 58). Let his be the last word on the issue.

2.4: Key Features of Cassirer's Philosophy of Culture

In this section I will highlight key features of the philosophy of symbolic forms that are crucial methodology for a philosophy of culture.

a. Philosophy of Culture as Necessarily Interdisciplinary

Cassirer's work is filled with references to a variety of cultures, researchers, and disciplines outside of philosophy. This is the only way to achieve the goal of a rigorous philosophy of culture; one must begin with the *factum*, the world that exists before our eyes, and constantly check our theorizing against it, adjusting when we find we have moved too far from the source, and evolving as the world evolves (cf. Luft 2015a, 127). In order to truly understand culture, one must collaborate with cultural creators from different fields. It would be a philosophical sin, not to mention a foolish methodology, to theorize about culture without engaging in it. Cassirer himself modeled this charge for collaboration in his own work and collaborations (see Levine 2013).

Insofar as no symbolic form should be understood as superior to another, internal consistency demands that the philosopher of culture privilege no one *methodological* perspective over another. If she wants to understand art, she must work with artists, those who operate within the form of art and who are far more familiar with the laws, logic, and internal structures of that form than her. She is obligated to reserve judgments based

on the criteria of another form when approaching the form of art; that is, she cannot determine, based on scientific criteria, whether or not a poem is well-written if she is to truly understand the artistic expression of spirit which the poem serves to embody. The collection of informed perspectives from experts with shared goals is the only genuine way to truth.

The final attribute of this feature of Cassirer's philosophy is the following: the value of interdisciplinary cooperation is not only necessary for a philosophy of culture to be properly rigorous, it is also normative command: "to change the perspective, our intellectual attitude, and so to become open and attentive to the otherness of different perspectives and worlds we have to deal with because we live in them" (Schwemmer 2004, 12). The normative import of this point will be explored in detail in subsection "c".

b. Philosophy of Culture as Necessarily Revisable

Language, art, myth, and science are only some of the forms through which culture is expressed. Cassirer's *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* was the beginning of a larger project, and thus the symbolic forms articulated within make up an incomplete list. As "products of the human spirit" (Cassirer 1955a, 78), symbolic forms "shape the character and destiny of culture" (Itzkoff 1977, 83) and "reflect the realities of cultural experience" (ibid., 98). In other words, the critique of culture is an ever-evolving process. The relationship between the human being and the forms is necessarily bidirectional:

> Man lives with *objects* only in so far as he lives with these *forms*; he reveals reality to himself, and himself to reality, in that he lets himself and the environment enter into this plastic medium, in which the two do not merely make contact, but fuse with each other. (Cassirer 1946, 10).

He continues, "it is solely by their [the forms'] agency that anything real becomes an object for intellectual comprehension, and as such is made visible to us" (Cassirer 1946, 8). Thus symbolic forms, which are the conditions for the possibility of experience, are driven and molded by the human spirit, and as such *are as fluid as that spirit*. The symbol is universal, but its contents and structures are always shifting, just as humanity shifts and adjusts to new and evolving external conditions: “A symbol is not only universal but extremely variable…A genuine human symbol is characterized not by its uniformity but by its versatility. It is not rigid or inflexible but mobile” (Cassirer 1944a, 36). As goes symbol, so goes culture.

As culture is always “in progress”, the work of the philosopher of culture can never be completed. There is no such thing as a “finished” critical philosophy of the cultural world just as there is no human world that has “finished” expressing itself through culture. Culture as such is not just an expression of *one* culture or *one* cultural contributor; it is a never-ending and inexhaustible relationship between persons and objects in the world: “It is no ‘absolute’ into which the I bumps, but the bridge that leads from one I-pole to another. Herein lies its real and most significant function. The living process of culture consists in the very fact that it is inexhaustible in its creation of such mediations and passages” (Cassirer 2000, 110). Cassirer knows that his own project is a work in progress, and encourages philosophers to continue beyond him, to critically engage culture in the same spirit. Performatively, his own views shift and evolve, albeit slightly, as his own experience with culture shifts; the rise of the Nazi regime demanded a critique of the cultural conditions under which it became possible: “Cassirer is always attempting to bring his philosophy to grips with culture as something alive and

concrete… Cassirer's original works of philosophy also involve a shift to a consideration of culture as concrete process and normative activity", Verene explains (Verene 1979, 11).

For Cassirer, it would be lazy, and, as we will see in the next subsection, *irresponsible* of philosophers to ever believe that their work is done. We must always revisit our conclusions and the work of those who proceeded us *from within the particular context that we currently find ourselves*. He calls this a "finding again", *Wiederfinden*, which "never reestablishes a truth known as a simple 'substance', as a thing existing and asserted. It is always something that 'functions', a truth *subject to development and reestablishment on the basis of new meanings*" (Verene 1979, 24, emphasis added). We must update our theories, reject dogmatism, and always ground ourselves in the *factum* of the world as it is in our time. "The creative will, and the creative power from which it emerged, continues to live and be effective within it and to lead to ever new creations" (Cassirer 2000, 127). We must never hold too tightly to our interpretation of the line from Cassirer's example, as that meaning may eventually be "out of date" and no longer tell us anything about the contemporary world: "This drawing [of the line] had a completely different character as an object in each instance. In this way it now becomes clear how that which we call the object is not to be understood in the manner of a fixed and rigid *forma substantialis* but rather as a functional form." (Cassirer 2015, 263). Symbolic forms are active, they *do something*, and so always ought we.

c. Philosophy of Culture as Necessarily Normative

The importance of the normative elements of Cassirer's philosophy of culture cannot be overemphasized. Cassirer spent the final years of his life pleading with

philosophers to come back to the *factum* of culture, to understand their role in the human project as a crucial one, and to articulate how it is that humanity veered so off course from the path toward freedom: "Every crisis in man's *thoughts* used to be accompanied by a deep crisis in his moral and social *conduct*" (Cassirer 1979, 220, emphasis in the original). Infighting between philosophical schools, and philosophers' sudden disinterest in the sociopolitical state of humanity, for Cassirer, was partially responsible for the dehumanizing political machine that took over Europe in the 20th century: "As soon as philosophy no longer trusts its own power, as soon as it gives way to a merely passive attitude, it can no longer fulfill its most important educational task. It cannot teach man how to develop his active faculties in order to form his individual and social life" (Cassirer 1979, 230). He continues, "In spite of all its learning, philosophy had become a stranger to the world and the problems of life which occupied man and the whole thought of the age had no part in its activities. It philosophized about everything except civilization" (Cassirer 1979, 232). Philosophy is a normative practice that teaches us to be reflective citizens and individuals. This is *our* job, and we must take this moral responsibility seriously lest humanity pay the price. Verene says,

> *An Essay on Man* is guided by a normative concern, by an attempt to make use of philosophy to make sense of the world of culture as a coherent project of human reason and imagination and, simultaneously, as a process of freedom, of 'progressive self-liberation'…It is an attempt to help us find our way within the social fragmentation of twentieth-century life. (Verene 1979, 13).

An Essay on Man pleas for philosophers to recalibrate and take up the responsibility of their calling, reminding us that philosophy *is* normative, and every symbolic form is subject to moral judgment.

Cassirer's final work, *The Myth of the State*, is a study of how philosophy failed the German people and thus allowed for the rise of the Nazi party and Russian Bolshevism. Here he emphasizes an element of his philosophy of symbolic forms that cannot be forgotten: the boundaries of the forms must be respected, and no form should subjugate another: "Though they all function organically together in the construction of spiritual reality, yet each of these organs has its individual assignment..." (Cassirer 1946, 9). There must be no confusion or conflation between forms. Each symbolic form has its own domain, its own criteria, and its own logic, and the domain of one form ought never be confused with the domain of another. One must not disregard the validity of religious or mythical truths by judging them against the criteria of the form of science, for example. To do so not only sabotages understanding, it creates an impossible impasse. When I use rational categories, which fall under the form of science, to judge the validity of religion, which falls under the form of myth, I speak past my interlocutor. I must understand that religion has different criteria for truth than reason, and I should assess the religious claims *from within religion's form* if I truly want to understand it. To use scientific categories when analyzing religious practice would thoroughly miss the point of religion. The same is true of the inverse; religion's categories and criteria cannot be used to understand or explain science because it does not have the tools or perspective to do justice to that which does not belong to its form. In other words, to conflate the symbolic forms by judging religion by the categories of reason is a normative failing. It is

"utilizing mythological categories in rational discourse which contorts rationality itself" (Luft 2004, 38), or vice versa. If philosophy is to do what philosophy claims it wants to do, it must cease infighting and remember its task. “All these differences [between philosophical schools] are eclipsed by one and the same fundamental tendency of thought – by the common effort to find a philosophic, a rational answer to the most urgent problems of man’s political and social life” (Cassirer 1979, 221). We must stay focused on this goal.

In the case of Germany, Cassirer argues that mythological consciousness had been weaponized by another form, politics, for a particular end, power, pushing reason aside in the minds of the German people and replacing it with myth of race worship. Philosophy alone cannot destabilize this myth, Cassirer says, but

> it can do us another service. It can make us understand the adversary… In order to fight an enemy we must know him. And to know him means not only to know his defects but also his strengths. To all of us it has become clear that we have greatly underrated the strength of the political myths. We should not repeat this error. We should see the adversary face to face; we should try to understand his true character, and we should study his methods. (Cassirer 1979, 266)

Indeed, we can only know what we are up against if we are willing to abandon dogmatism, insist on collaboration, and allow the *factum* of culture to guide us where we are most needed. Such actions are examples of what José Medina calls “epistemic virtue”, a term I will revisit in chapter 5. “[P]hilosophy has a duty to society,” Verene explains, “the duty to preserve and further general understanding of the ideals on which

social life and civilization are based." (Verene 1979, 10) He continues, "Philosophy can allow us to understand the events and to formulate human ideals, but it is not a direct agent of change" (Verene 1979, 10). Philosophy and humanity are inherently and inescapably normative: "the symbolizing power of the human world makes possible the ethical, the movement from 'facts to ideals' that is found only in the human realm." (Verene 1979, 12). Philosophies which ignore morality in their theorizing are improperly functioning, and in this way may not even be properly called philosophy. It is for this reason that ethics or morality is not itself a symbolic form – it penetrates and permeates all cultural expression and none are exempt from its judgment.

2.5: Conclusion

In this chapter I explored Cassirer's history, the influence of the Marburg method in his philosophy of culture, and key features of his philosophy of symbolic forms. I argued for a horizontal interpretation of the philosophy of symbolic forms and the interdisciplinary method Cassirer models. I explained the normative urgency in Cassirer's work, and connected the human being to her work toward a self-liberated humanity.

Given the nature of the forms, the method by which a philosopher of culture must proceed is by first identifying which forms are existent, and then articulating the internal structures of that form from within that form. In the next chapter, I will only focus on the former, making a case for the existence of the symbolic form of humor. The existence of the form is foundational to any work concerning what that form entails, or, as Cassirer explains of the philosophy of symbolic forms as such, "it is not a question of what we see in a certain perspective, but of the perspective itself" (Cassirer 1946, 11). Thus my goal

here will be to show that conceptual space exists for humor as a symbolic form, and that doing so will solve the root of a foundational problem in the philosophy of humor.

HUMOR AS A SYMBOLIC FORM[5]

3.1: Introduction

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Cassirer's project is a launching point for further investigations, not a complete and closed system. In this chapter I will offer my own theory of humor, a theory in the spirit of Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, that I believe can describe all instances and species of humor, takes seriously humor as a social and cultural force, and has the explanatory power to understand how the theories discussed in Chapter 1 provide insights into humor while ultimately failing to capture it. I will begin by giving a rough interpretation of the criteria needed for something to be given the title of "symbolic form". I will utilize Cassirer's own insights into the nature of humor and begin to distinguish humor from the other forms. I will apply Cassirer's methodology to argue for humor as a symbolic form, showing how humor can meet all the of criteria. In the next chapter, I will complete this argument by presenting humor's distinct function, a function that is necessary to humor but only accidental to other symbolic forms.

3.2: Criteria for Symbolic Forms

Here I will revisit and condense some of what we covered in chapter 2 in order to create a list of criteria for something to be properly categorized as a symbolic form. A symbolic form is a "perspective" from which one can view the world. Each perspective has its own internal laws and logic, its own function, is distinct from the other symbolic

[5] Portions of this chapter appeared in Marra 2015.

forms, and irreducible to them; this is our first set of criteria for humor to gain status as a symbolic form. Each form provides not merely different understandings, but rather understandings that cannot be had through any other means. It is this that makes Cassirer's account transcendental: "it is the condition of possibility of the experience of any object to see it through 'forms of intuition', which are symbolic, i.e., meaningful, but meaningful in different manners" making the account "necessarily plural" (Luft 2015a, 167). Our next criterion, then, is that a form must reveal a perspective about an object of perception that is impossible to "see" from any other perspective (Luft 2015a, 166).

A symbolic form must have its own unique function (Luft 2015a, 168). By "function," Cassirer means the way in which the form operates in human life. While specific things within symbolic forms may perform multiple functions accidentally, each form has a peculiar function that is necessary to its being a form at all; a function that defines the purpose of that form for human experience. This criterion will be explored at length in the next chapter.

Next, a symbolic form must be universal and immediate in a subject's experience: "They are *constructions that exist prior to me even knowing and understanding them*…they were constructed before me, without my doing, but are the result of an intersubjectivity" (Luft 2015a, 167, emphasis in the original). It is in this sense that the symbolic forms are conditions for the possibility of experiencing meaning in the world, created and transformed intersubjectively, and thus the meanings are themselves in flux and subject to change. It is this feature that makes symbolic forms intrinsically fluid (Krois 1987, 172-2015; cited in Luft 2015a, 167); the meanings evolve as human beings evolve, changing and adapting in response to and alongside of humanity.

Finally, for a symbolic form to be a symbolic form, it must be possible to understand any and every object of experience from its unique perspective (Luft 2015a, 167). There are no possible objects of experience that cannot be understood in terms of art, science, or myth, for example; any object, then, must have the possibility of being perceived as an object of humor for humor to be a symbolic form. No object is exclusive to any one symbolic form, nor is any symbolic form exclusive to any object or objects; rather, a symbolic form must have the capacity to interpret all objects of experience in its own terms.

In summary the criteria that must be met for the status of symbolic form is as follows:

i. A symbolic form must have its own internal laws and logics distinct from other forms
ii. a symbolic form must reveal information about an object of perception that is impossible to "see" from any other perspective
iii. each symbolic form has one necessary function that defines the purpose of that form for human experience
iv. the symbolic forms are universal and immediate in experience
v. symbolic forms are intersubjectively constituted
vi. a symbolic form must have the capacity to interpret any and all objects of experience in its own terms
vii. symbolic forms are dynamic, not static

I will argue that humor meets all the criteria. First, though, it is worthwhile to see what Cassirer himself writes about humor and its role in human life. While my argument for

the realization of humor as a symbolic form is pragmatic and methodological, and thus does not require a complete cohesion with the letter of Cassirer, it is worthwhile to focus on an often-ignored analysis Cassirer gives on humor. As I will show, Cassirer's account makes a strong case for humor as distinct from and irreducible to other symbolic forms, among other criteria. As I move through this chapter, I will indicate the criterion I aim to fulfill in parenthesis.

3.3: Cassirer on Humor[6]

The context within which Cassirer speaks of humor in the relatively obscure 1932 text *The Platonic Renaissance in England* is through an extended analysis of Shakespeare and Shaftesbury. Cassirer's analysis aims to show that the meaning of "the comic" underwent a significant change during the Renaissance. Comedy transformed from retellings of mythology to powerful force of spirit: "It was first in the realm of the comic that this spirit celebrated its highest triumphs and won its decisive victories".[7] The change

[6] Some research has been done in regard to Cassirer's writings on humor, but these examinations face many of the same issues that come alongside conflating laughter with humor. Brian Poole, for example, may be one of the only scholars I am aware of that who writes on these portions of Cassirer's texts, but his analysis is completely unhelpful when it comes to the question of humor theory – he, too, conflates terms, claiming both that Cassirer has a theory of *laughter* similar to Bergson's, and an ethics of *humor*, both of which are difficult to prove given that Poole defines neither term, doesn't consider the relationship (or lack thereof) between laughter and humor, or addresses Cassirer's presentation of *comedy* as a biproduct of the symbolic form of art. There are many interesting things to be gleaned from Cassirer's discussions of comedy, laughter, and play, which I will address here, though with strict attention to the distinction of terms and the context within which they are presented. It is inaccurate to say that Cassirer himself has a theory of humor buried in his work, though I will argue that his words on the topic coupled with his methodology can gives us the tools to create one in his spirit.

[7] Cassirer argues particularly for the existence of this trend in Italy, Spain, France, and Germany, but it is not difficult to find examples of this theme in the humor and theatrical comedy of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

the comic underwent in the Renaissance, according to Cassirer, was a change from recalling the past to shaping the future:

> The Renaissance power of comic representation thus *belongs inseparably and essentially to its power of action*, to its vital and creative energies. Yet, if the comic thus became the strongest aggressive weapon of modern times, its effect was, on the other hand, to take away the violence and bitterness of that struggle out of which the modern era arose. For the comic spirit contains also an element of balance and reconciliation. It does not entertain feelings of hatred towards the world which its free play is destroying, which it cannot but negate; on the contrary, the comic spirit forms rather the last glorification of this decadent world. (1953, 171. Emphasis added)

Humor evolved from *representation* to *activity*; a progression Cassirer believes is typical for symbolic forms in general, as recounted in chapter 2. The point of his analysis of Shaftesbury and Shakespeare is to show how the Platonists in the Cambridge school influenced their writings to reflect the evolution of culture. The symbolic formations through which culture is shaped are transformed through the creations of spirit which aim toward freedom:

> Human existence is not, however, a matter of physical activity alone; on the contrary, it can rise to freedom and to the heights of pure intuition. No other species of living creatures is capable of such exaltation. No other views with wonder the magnificent structure and the beauty of the world, and knows the delight of pleasing odours otherwise than in recognising

> nourishment. And no other living species distinguishes between harmonious and dissonant sounds. In Shaftesbury we find the full and pure echo of this viewpoint. (1953, 187)

Shaftesbury, then, serves as an example of the progression of the function of humor in culture, as influenced by the Cambridge school and the Renaissance, as a progression toward emancipation.

While discussing the influence of these writers, Cassirer speaks of humor almost as if it were a symbolic form in its own right. In his analyses of Miguel de Cervantes, he says:

> Thus in the power of the comic lives the power of love which will and can understand even that form of the world which the intellectual must abandon and surmount... From the different kinds and varieties of the comic, from sarcasm and jest, from satire and irony, emerges the new approach, the *original form of humor*, with increasing clarity and self-consciousness. This humor must first be stripped of its multifarious cloaks and disguises, but it stands before us finally as an *original and independent entity*. (1953, 171-172; emphasis added)

And later, when speaking of the work of Shakespeare:

> The *form of humor* now to prevail is not unsuitable to the immediate presence of suffering, or even death. It is no longer confined to mere play of the mind... Humor henceforth takes its place in the heart of Shakespeare's world, forming everywhere the medium of reconciliation of all the opposites which this world comprehends. ... The element of

> nobility, indeed of humility, characterizes *true* humor, as distinguished from mere wit. For in the *world of humor* the apparent truth of things proves over and over again to be mere show. But humor can sense the real immanent truth behind show and acknowledge it as such. ... In the *realm of humor*, too, epochs meet and intermingle in strange ways. For humor looks before and after; it helps to usher in the vital shapes of the future without renouncing the past. (1953, 178-179; emphasis added)

This account of humor, while brief, is quite rich. First, Cassirer uses the language of forms when speaking of humor itself, speaking of "the original form of humor", "true humor", "the world of humor", and "the realm of humor". Humor is treated by Cassirer almost as if it were a perspective in its own right, as a symbolic form. Were humor reducible to another form, it would be very odd for Cassirer to speak of it in this way. Furthermore, he distinguishes between humor (as a form) from different species of humor such as wit: "The element of nobility, indeed of humility, characterizes true humor, as distinguished between mere wit" (Cassirer 1953, 178). Wit is a type of humor but it is not humor itself, and wit is certainly *not* considered a form itself. The same is true of the other "kinds and varieties of the comic" such as "sarcasm and jest", "satire and irony" (Ibid.). Cassirer also provides us clues as to what the function of humor could be, and how it serves our symbolic world; these features of his account will be explored in the next chapter.

3.4: Humor as a Symbolic Form

With this background, I will proceed with a modest argument: for the sake of comprehending humor itself, understanding the seemingly contradictory conclusions of

humor theory, and to account for the power of humor in culture, we ought to understand humor as a symbolic form. We can do this by following Cassirer's methodology, and doing so will give us a theory that includes all the same beneficial features as outlined in chapter 2: necessarily interdisciplinary, revisable, and normative. This methodology, and these features, will grant us a theory that has extraordinary explanatory power and will represent humor as something created, sustained, and experienced by human beings (cf Cassirer 1955a, 20).

My argument has two parts: a negative part and a positive part. Here I will only present the negative argument. The criteria I argue for are notated in parenthesis throughout. The positive argument will follow in chapter 4.

The negative argument for criteria (i) and (ii) is as follows. If humor shares laws and logic with another symbolic form (i.), humor theorists would simply need to identify that form and explore the role of humor as an instance of that form. But theorists have attempted just that over the years; neither the scientists nor the aesthetes, the linguists nor the evolutionists, have been successful. Either hundreds of years of research and study have failed to understand humor, or humor is not understandable from the perspectives theorists have taken thus far. If humor is indeed its own symbolic form, then the only way to fully grasp it is to approach it from within, on its own terms. This gives us the tools to understand how it is that each theory explored in chapter 1 can be appropriate from within the form the theorist occupies *while at the same time* being inappropriate from other perspectives. It seems, particularly in philosophical treatments, that some theorists operate as if humor is a symbolic form but without the terminology or metaphysical backdrop. Others, as mentioned, reduce humor to their field. From the perspective of

science, humor *is* a consequence of physiological and psychological material forces; from the perspective of art, humor *is* reducible to audience directed performance, whether on stage, on television, or in an image; from the perspective of language, humor *is* the organization and grammar of linguistic meaning and word play. We can account for the "correctness" of the theories in chapter 1 if we understand that each theorist is operating with different understandings of what counts as valid and relevant evidence.

What the scientist "sees" when theorizing about humor is not what the artist will "see", and vice versa, and none will "see" humor for what it is unless they recognize it as its own way of "seeing" (ii.). This is why humor theory has found no answer – it has asked the wrong question. The question should not concern the physiological or psychological causes or effects of humor, or the linguistic mechanisms behind humor, or the evolution of humor throughout human history. The answers to these questions do indeed give us information but will always, even collectively, *miss the point*. Only by asking what humor is from the "wide" perspective of philosophy can we understand humor and why previous theories have failed. We must not continue in this vein; we would do a disservice to humor theory, and set ourselves up for this failure, if we did. Breaking from this habit allows us to untangle the knots of historical theories. If we follow the philosophy of the symbolic forms, we realize that the answer to the question of humor has evaded us thus far because we have held too tightly to our form of expertise and have not granted the possibility of a plurality of "correct" insights.

In sum, if humor is its own a symbolic form, it can only be understood accurately from within. Other forms, such as science, art, or myth, have tried, but have not succeeded. But if we understand humor as a symbolic form, it gives us the explanatory

power to understand *why* humor functions the way it does in our lives, the *power* and *persistence* of humor, and how it can be the case that a particular theory of humor can capture one aspect of it while still failing to capture humor *as it is experienced* in life and culture. This is the negative argument for the existence of *unique* laws and logic within humor which suggests its status as a symbolic form (i.).

Criteria (ii) and (iii) are highly related, and I will argue at length for humor's ability to meet these criteria in the chapter 4. In brief, I will argue that humor functions, to paraphrase Kant, to "wake us from the dogmatic slumbers". The information that we draw from humor can serve as a catalyst to break from our limited perspectives, to "take off the blinders", and spark curiosity – in other words, to disrupt epistemic viciousness.

I will argue that the function of humor is to dismantle the seriousness with which we commit to the laws and logic of our chosen symbolic form. For example, take the religion versus science debate. The criteria of validity for religion will never satisfy the scientist, at least not until the scientist understands that religion gives but *another* legitimate perspective, and this perspective is *compatible* with her own. This requires "breaking her out" of the strict adherence to scientific laws and logic, to become open-minded, to "see outside of" the strict boundaries of science to acknowledge that the insights that other forms offer give us new perspectives of the world (ii.). These perspectives are not in competition, as none is more or less important than any other.

As discussed in the previous chapter, symbolic forms are universal to all human beings and cultures and are immediate in our experience of them. In other words, we confront a world in which symbolic forms are already operating, and we can only understand our experience through those symbolic forms. My experience is immediately

constituted in light of *some* symbolic form; there is no such thing as experiencing an object outside of, or divorced from, *some* meaning with which it is imbued. *Intersubjective* constitution requires that the meanings are determined and shared between a number of individuals, consciously or unconsciously. Let's apply these features, one at a time, to humor.

Humor is universal to all human beings. In addition to the Hurley et. al. (Hurley, Dennett, & Adams, Jr., 2011) and Gervais et. al. (Gervais & Wilson, 2005) evolutionary studies which claim that humor began as a psychological safety mechanism, historical evidence of humor reaches as far back as our earliest ancestors; anthropologists have even found evidence of humor in early human cave art (Will, 2008). Further, recall from chapter 1 that scientists and psychologists have identified the origins of humor development. The adult sense of humor begins in play. Play (as we will see later in this chapter, section V.b.) is exploratory physical and cognitive behaviors that begin in infancy (Fox et. al. 2013). Since all human beings begin as infants, and all infants engage in exploratory physical and cognitive behaviors no matter their particular genetic makeup, then it is the case that all human beings participate in and recognize humor. Furthermore, humor is a purely human phenomenon; it is a cultural sphere that only human beings are capable of developing (Provine 2000, 96). From this evidence – that humor has always been a part of human culture, that all human beings naturally develop tendencies toward humor, and that humor is a phenomenon that only arises in humanity – we can conclude that humor is indeed *universal* to human beings and human beings alone (iv.).

I also argue that humor is a perspective through which we interpret the world, and this perspective is immediate – that is, not forced or intentional (iv.). Up to this point in my dissertation, I have made very clear that laughter has no necessary connection to humor, and thus cannot and should not be understood as an external cue to a subject's experiencing of something humorous. However, here I'd like to focus solely on that spontaneous and uncontrollable laughter emitted when we do experience humor. More particularly, I'm speaking of the sort of laughter that erupts when 1) we are alone, and therefore without social influence, and 2) when we perceive something that we experience as humorous. Under these conditions, we can see the spontaneity of humor in experience through this physiological sign. When something strikes us as humorous such that it results in genuine laughter, the laughter is not something that we consider or control.

Sometimes our confrontation with a humorous stimulus is a surprise even to us, such as in cases where we cannot explain what precisely was funny, or feel guilt following the humored response. Take the following anecdote from a social function I attended a few years ago. I went into a children's craft tent to paint masks with the kids. A man about my age entered the tent and engaged me in casual conversation, then picked up a mask, stared into its empty eye sockets, and proclaimed in a knowing voice, "You know, I think we all wear masks sometimes". I burst into laughter. My immediate experience of this statement was that he was making a joke. I was wrong, and awkwardness followed. Now there are plenty of reasons why the man's comment would strike me as funny: his posture, my projection of sarcasm in his tone, the banality of the comment itself. But none of these things required calculation or reflection – my

experience of the comment was humorous, immediately, spontaneously, and, as it turned out, at the expense of the communal order. The immediacy of our experience of humor is clear – not just in cases such as this, where I had to "be told" that what was said wasn't funny (through body language and facial expression), but in cases where there is nothing at stake. When my dog aggressively licks herself to the point of tumbling off the couch, my experience of this is as hilarious as it is immediate. Humor is indeed *immediate* in experience (iv.).

Next, I will show that without the symbolic form of humor, some experiences and events would be incomprehensible. The objects will be understood, but only through an interpretation of another form. There are artefacts, like the novelty object, that would be incomprehensible *without* the symbolic form of humor (ii). The object will have meaning, but not its intended meaning, and not the meaning understood by those who interpret it through humor. We can analyze the oversized pencil, set of chattering teeth, thumb drive shaped like a thumb, etc., through all the other symbolic forms and we would collect information about the object. But understanding the object *for what it is* requires us to analyze it as a *humorous* object. To understand the object, in its existence and its purpose, demands that we understand it as *a different sort of thing*, a humorous thing. We see this *immediately* in such objects.

Humor requires context. We see it when we witness a joke that we don't understand. When we share an "inside joke" with a close friend in the presence of an acquaintance, the acquaintance does not share the meaning of the joke and thus will not understand or recognize the joke as humorous. Even after the intimately shared meaning is explained, he will likely not find the joke as funny; the friends often excuse themselves

with some variation of "you had to be there". This example shows that humor is *intersubjectively constituted* (v.). Sharing meaning with another is a prerequisite for understanding his humor as humor. We see this not only in the inside joke example, but in cultural "senses of humor"; the comedy of Japan is notoriously lost on American audiences, just as many jokes lose some of their punch when translated from one language to another. The intersubjectivity of humor has been argued for at length in LaFollette and Shanks (1993) and McGraw et. al (2012, 2014, 2014a, 2014b). Humor cannot be created or experienced in a vacuum. The BBH theory's "flickering" described in chapter 1 requires belief sets. Sets exist because we are social creatures constantly interacting with others; in cases when we do not have a shared understanding of the set, or the meaning upon which one is drawing, we will not "get" a joke. This contextual element excludes the possibility that any object or person *is* intrinsically funny but includes the possibility that any object or person *can* be funny given the right conditions (this in itself offers evidence for the next criterion). Because humor requires intersubjectively shared meanings, and those meanings are created by human beings, humor is intersubjectively constituted. No object or experience is inherently humorous; humor is wholly dependent on intersubjectively shared meaning constituted by the socio-cultural world (vi).

Cassirer traced the *dynamic* evolution of the symbolic forms in *Language and Myth* and the first and second volumes of the philosophy of symbolic forms (vii.). Over time, he claims, forms progress from simple to complex, from applying meaning to what is immediate in experience to applying abstract and ideal meanings (Cassirer 2015, 258). Meanings begin with the immediate subjective impression and build up to objective law

of the form, stages which Cassirer calls expressive (reflective of immediate experience), representative (general conception of location and relationships), and significative (abstracted to the level of general laws) (Ibid., 259; 1944a, 46). In each stage, the form is built upon, retaining elements of its history. Humor is dynamic, and progresses in stages. From the simplistic physical pleasure in infancy to the cognitive complexity of the adult sense of humor, our associated meanings become more abstracted, while never escaping relations to the lived experience. As children, we enjoy expressive humor, and typically can only understand humor which has a empirical referent; in other words, because children up to a certain age cannot pick up on nuance, they need prat falls. As we grow in our conceptual and cognitive complexity, we begin to appreciate puns, dry humor, and subtlety. We also retain elements of our childhood sense of humor; some of us still giggle at slapstick despite ourselves. Not only does our personal humor style develop in stages over time, but humanity's humor has also evolved and grown. Recall from chapter 1 that what Provine calls "proto-humor" exists in both early humanity and in primates, though only humanity moved beyond it – evidence exists in cave paintings, pottery in Greece and sculpture in Africa, to the sociopolitical humor of the court jester and stand-up comedian, to slapstick stars of the silent screen, to the most popular humor today – memes, which exist mainly in the digital sphere and consist of still or moving images, oftentimes accompanied by captions. These new types of humor will need new types of categories to account for them, making the philosophy of humor, like the philosophy of culture itself, a continuous project.

This analysis of the progress of humor recognition and preference in an individual chronology is similar to what we know of the evolution of human beings. Hurley et. al.

(2011) theorize that humor was initially about survival; void of the luxuries we currently enjoy, as well as the physical evolution of the body and brain, it is likely that the humor of early humans occupied the expressive stage, tied closely to immediate empirical events. The representative phase came when we began to make meaning based on relationships between objects of experience; this phase is captured by Incongruity theories. Whether Benign Violation, Belief Based, or Incongruity theories depend on relationships between one concept and another. The joke represents these relationships and the incompatibility of their combination. Additionally, we see traces of this stage in the Superiority theory, where humor requires an understanding of representations and relations of sociopolitical hierarchies (Morreall 2009, 4-5).

Elements of the expressive and representative stages of humor remain today, though have certainly evolved to contain meanings reflective of our own times and challenges. New types of culture require new methods of humor to account for it. Satire and irony may not have always been part of the expression of humor, and likely came into being as sociopolitical structures developed. The significative phase of humor may be the taxonomy of humor theories themselves: they are analyses of the empirical abstracted for the sake of creating general laws. Until now, however, humor-inspired theories must be redefined in terms of other forms as they come from the perspectives of that variety. Modestly, a symbolic form theory of humor may be a proper representation of the significative phase of humor as it remains within its form, though of course it is likely that we will refine and progress beyond as human circumstances continue to change. This final significative phase comes with caution. It “presents a reciprocal relationship and correspondence that is grasped as a general law. But we must refrain

from thinking of the elements which enter into this relationship as independent entities and contents that can exist and have meaning outside of this relation" (Cassirer 2015, 216). In this phase, and in this study, we must keep in mind that we are always tied to humor as a cultural creation granted meaning by humanity and does not exist independently. This satisfies criteria (v) and (vii).

The final criteria regards the possibility of any object to be interpreted by any form. Empirical evidence and testimony reveal that anything, and anyone, can be interpreted through the lens of humor (vi.), including those many things that an individual may be prevented from or will choose not to interpret in such a way. As mentioned in chapter 1, McGraw, Williams, and Warren (2014b) of the Benign Violation Theory – this interference is called "psychological distance." There are four types of distance the authors identify: 1) temporal, 2) social, 3) spatial or physical, and 4) hypothetical. Temporal distance refers to the length of time that has passed between the event and the humor regarding the event. Some people can interpret a tragic event through humor soon after the event; in which case they may have psychological distance of another type. Others often shut down the humorous interpretation with the refrain "too soon" (602). Social distance refers to the nature of the relationship between the subject and the object of humor. I am far more likely to find humor in a joke about someone I dislike or do not care for than I am to find humor in jokes about my sister or myself. Spatial or physical distance refers to humorous interpretations regarding the location in relation to the interpreter. For Americans, jokes about mass murder in Syria are likely to play better than jokes about mass shootings in Paris, which are likely to play better than jokes about the mass shootings in the location in which the joke is being told. The same jokes can be

interpreted as humorous or tasteless dependent on the physical location in which the jokes are told. The final type of psychological distance is hypothetical distance, which refers to humor which implies an alternate or possible reality as opposed to what is actually the case. A prat fall is funny because the harm is hypothetical, the person is not injured in reality. If the actor *is* actually hurt much of the laughter will turn to concern as the hypothetical distance disappears, interrupting the humorous interpretation (Ibid., 602-603). Or, in other words, the violation is not benign.

Psychological distance can help or hurt ones' humorous interpretation dependent on the nature of the object in question. More serious tragedies are more easily interpreted through humor the further the temporal, social, spatial, or hypothetical distance, while more benign mishaps are more easily interpreted when they are closer (Ibid., 603). Watching George W. Bush dodge a thrown shoe is more easily viewed as funny by us than experienced by him or his family (the same can be said about the esophagus-obstructing pretzel). A shoe to the face has potential for substantial harm and humiliation, and thus we need distance from the target to immediately view it through the lens of humor. The same event happening to a child would be a cause for outrage and likely would never be found funny by the parent. Now this is not to say that it is impossible for one without the appropriate psychological distance to place herself within the form of humor, it is simply to say that the individual may be unable or unwilling to do so at that time. This is echoed by the epistemological account of LaFollette and Shanks, as addressed in chapter 1. They locate the cause of an inability or unwillingness to "see" humor as associated with emotions, moods, beliefs, and cognitive states which block flickering (1993: 334-335). The psychological and epistemological research supports my

claim that humor meets the criteria that any object of experience can be interpreted through the lens of humor while giving a satisfying explanation for differences in humor reception.

a. Humor as Irreducible

I have presented arguments for criteria (i), and (iv) through (vii). Arguments for (ii) and (iii) comprise chapter 4. Here I argue that humor is irreducible to the other symbolic forms Cassirer names. This part of the argument, the negative part, will be complimented by the positive argument in the next chapter.

The existence of visual humor in the form of comic strips, facial expressions, and other visual and auditory forms disqualifies humor from being reduced to the symbolic form of language. This is also true of the form of science, as reducing humor to science voids humor of its power and influence in human life. Scientific descriptions of material causes of humor cannot and do not capture the *experience* of humor. Dismissing language and science as the proper symbolic form under which humor should be subsumed is, I believe, an uncontroversial stance that does not require further argumentation.

Mythology, like language, has its hands in all symbolic forms, and it is the same with humor. Historical comedic figures, from those that appeared on Greek pottery (the famous Pronomos Vase, for example) to those who appeared in the Yoruba oral traditions (Ajayi 1985) to the subjects of South African trickster tales (Orewa and Shreve 1975) were ways to transmit mythological premises and understandings of the world and our place within it. But humor cannot be reduced to comedy, and comedy, as a sub-form of humor, cannot be reduced to mythology. Humor is more than myth, and, as we will see, has a much difference aim.

The most challenging distinction to make is that between humor and the symbolic form of art. If we think of artwork specifically as the business of creating with intention of being experienced by an audience, humor is not art. Often humor arises unintentionally, without a particular audience in mind, and often without an audience at all, as when individuals silently reflect on a humorous memory. The performance of comedy is often understood as art; many comedians and thespians insist on this classification as a means of legitimizing the rigor and talent that it takes to execute their work (see Kondabolu 2014a, for example). And indeed, comedy can be artfully presented or executed, but it is not reducible to art. This argument will come in three parts: the first part will show that while Cassirer's study of "the comic" is in the context of an artistic analysis, the way in which he describes it is sympathetic to the categorization of humor as a symbolic form. The second part utilizes Cassirer's insistence on the distinction between art and *play*, a phenomenon that researchers have connected to humor development in individuals. The final part of the argument requires supportive found within an analysis of the function of humor, which will be explored in the next chapter.

b. Cassirer and "The Comic"

In my attempt to draw out Cassirer's sympathy toward humor as a symbolic form earlier in this chapter, one may object that the loose way in which Cassirer's vocabulary vacillates between "humor" and "the comic", as well as the context within which this passage appears, suggests that Cassirer collapses humor into art and simply speaks too boldly when he uses "form" terminology. After all, the context of his analysis is a study of particular "artists", not of comedians per se, and this discussion is couched in a study of how these artists were influenced by Platonism. Cassirer is explicit about referring to

the writers in question as artists (1953, 166-167), and we can certainly agree that the analysis of literature is appropriate as an artistic analysis. We should remember, though, that any object of experience can be subject to an artistic analysis (as art is a symbolic form). Thus the artistic lens through which Cassirer proceeds neither negates nor contradicts the claim that humor is *also* a symbolic form. But this response is not enough to quell the objection that humor can or should be subsumed by art.

In the aforementioned quotations, Cassirer treats comedy, the comic, and types of humor (such as wit) differently, and this difference is of crucial importance. Given that Cassirer is not focused here on defining or categorizing humor, it is understandable that he would not pay close attention to the terminology he is using, and this hints at the unconscious, or at least uninvestigated, ways in which Cassirer thinks about humor as a cultural force. For example, Cassirer treats comedy and "the comic" as different categories; "comedy" as particular objects capable of being understood within the form of art, and "the comic" as an abstract category. “The comic spirit” is used interchangeably with “world of humor”, “realm of humor”, and “form of humor”, as we see in the above quotations (from 1953, 171, 172, and 178). Thus I take Cassirer’s use of “the comic” to be what philosophers of humor today would call the broad category of “humor”. Under this category falls all “the various types and species” of humor that Cassirer mentions, such as wit, satire, sarcasm, and irony (1953, 170).

Comedy, on the other hand, is not the category but the artefact. It is the tangible creation of cultural contributors that participate in “the comic”. Cassirer speaks of the comedies of Shakespeare and Cervantes in *Essay on Man* as objects of art, history, and language (1944a, 158, 222, and 168, respectively). Though a trivially true point,

comedies are not symbolic forms. This distinguishes comedy from the comic. Comedies can utilize many methods of the comic in their expression, tools such as satire, wit, irony, etc. The *method* through which the comic expresses itself is not a symbolic form either; it is a means of proceeding toward a particular goal, in this case, the goal of creating comedies. Thus the comic, comedy, and types of comedic method are different for Cassirer. The way in which he describes these concepts is with the comic as the form, comedy as the expression, and wit as the method. The comic is a category unto itself under which comedy and method fall.

c. Play

Researchers suggest that the adult sense of humor (as revealed, for example, in the McGraw/Warner studies) begin with the impulse for play in infancy (Gimbel 2018, 31). Not a theory of humor itself, but rather an argument for the development of humor "styles" (such as inclinations toward self-deprecating, aggressive, or defensive humor), play is a distinct topic of investigation from the evolutionary claims of Hurley et. al. The research of the child psychologist is not at odds with the evolutionary account in that the former is identifying how humor develops in the span of a lifetime while the latter theorizes how humor developed in the human species. Play scholars look at psychological and social development in children to trace what influences inclinations toward enjoyment and creation of humor (Fox et. al. 2013). If it is the case that humor begins in play, it is fruitful not only to look at this development in light of the methodology of the symbolic forms, but also Cassirer's analysis of play.

While exploring their motor skills, infants recognize certain accidental motions of the body as pleasurable; as their motor skills develop, children intentionally repeat these

actions. As motor and cognitive skills gain complexity, children seek out more complex mental and physical activities which bring pleasure (Fox, Dean, & Lyford, 2013). According to L.S. Vygotsky, in childhood we begin to play, and this activity, according to child psychologists, is already beyond that which brings children pleasure (Vygotsky 2016, 6). Play is connected to "the child's needs, inclinations, incentives, and motives to act" (6); when the child understands a goal as practically impossible, she uses her imagination: "[Play] must always be understood as the imaginary, illusory realization of unrealizable desires" (7). Vygotsky argues alongside Provine that the type of imagination necessary for play, and therefore the development of humor, is something that is absent in animals, representing a "specifically human form of conscious activity. Like all functions of consciousness, it originally arises from action" (7). Social and interpersonal factors and exposures are different for everyone, thus we will all have a range of preferred humor, and the sense of humor can vary significantly between cultures and even within families. If we accept the premise that humor development begins in the play of the child, then we can see a progression not unlike Cassirer articulates for other symbolic forms; we progress from representation in play, where we mimic our desired end in play, to activity in humor, where we create jokes.

Cassirer spends a significant amount of time arguing that art cannot be reduced to play in *Essay on Man*, a view he cites as held by Konrad Lange. His account is compatible with the findings of child psychologists. Notice that Cassirer explains play as that which "toys with reality" while art represents pure forms:

> Of a different type are those theories which hope to elucidate the nature of art by reducing it to the function of play…play is an active function…In

> play and in art we leave behind us our immediate practical needs in order to give our world a new shape. But this analogy is not sufficient to prove a real identity. Artistic imagination always remains sharply distinguished from that sort of imagination which characterizes our play activity…Play gives us illusive images; art gives us a new kind of truth – a truth not of empirical things but of pure forms. (1944a, 163-164)

The imagination that Vygotsky argues is essential to play and unique to human beings is also crucial; for Cassirer there are three different kinds of imagination:

> the power of invention, the power of personification, and the power to produce pure sensuous forms. In the play of a child we find the two former powers, but not the third. The child plays with *things*, the artist plays with *forms*, with lines and designs, rhythms and melodies. In a playing child we admire the facility and quickness of transformation. The greatest tasks are performed with the scantiest means. Any piece of wood may be turned into a living being. Nevertheless, this transformation signifies only a metamorphosis of the objects themselves; it does not mean a metamorphosis of objects into forms. In play we merely rearrange and redistribute the materials given to sense perception…The child's world has a much greater mobility and transmutability. Yet the playing child, nevertheless, does no more than exchange the actual things of his environment for other possible things. No such exchange as this characterizes genuine artistic activity. (1944a, 164)

Cassirer would thus explain Vygotsky's claim that play is the creation of a world in which the impossible is possible as an imaging of other *realities* rather than an imagining of *ideals*.

But this does not mean that play is concerned only with the present; play has a function, according to Cassirer, and that function (like the function of all symbolic forms) is future-oriented:

> Play gives us diversion and recreation but it also serves a different purpose. Play has a general biological relevance in so far as it anticipates future activities. [Play is] accomplishing a sort of preparation and education for other more serious tasks. The function of fine art cannot be accounted for in this manner. (1944a, 165)

The function of play described here has a remarkable compatibility with the contemporary research on pragmatic uses of humor (see Beard 2008, Davies 2013, Isen 2000, Isen 2001). If humor development begins in the play of children, we see the presence of the teleological element from the very beginning of humor expression in culture.

Kwame Anthony Appiah recognizes in play the ease with which human beings, in Cassirer's language, approach objects from different symbolic horizons:

> our capacity for multiple representations is evident from our earliest years…[in children's'] aptitude for make-believe…she's [the child playing at cooking] not worried about being burned. Because she knows that the cake is 'hot' in her make-believe, she knows that the mud that 'is' the cake is cool…The child who plays at cooking need not be *taught* that

> she is not really cooking…We come prebaked for make-believe. (Appiah 2017, 105-106)

Playing for Appiah is a creation of a world that is connected to the real one but with some sort of intentionally suspended belief. And this suspension of belief in make-believe is not just found in the play of children but in the emotional reaction of the adult to a scenario known to be fictitious, such as a play or, more relevant for our purposes, a standup comedy set. "What is suspended," he writes, "is not disbelief but the normal affective response to disbelief. I am reacting – but only in some respects – as if I believe [Ophelia] has died" (108). If play is, as Appiah claims, connected to a "world-traveling", and play develops, as Vygotsky claims, into a sense of humor in which new ideals are posited, then what we have on our hands with humor is a symbolic form that requires an *epistemic openness* to be properly engaged; that is, it requires that we deny the idea of a supreme perspective and consider the perspective of some other. This idea is connected to what I will argue is humor's function in the next chapter.

While Cassirer argues that play is not concerned with ideals, he certainly does believe that humor is, as we saw earlier in this chapter. If he had connected play to the comic he could have traced a progression from representation to activity in the vein characteristic of symbolic forms. I have shown here that, given the way in which Cassirer carves out his categories, he would be sympathetic to the idea of humor as a symbolic form regardless of the fact that he never took up the task of carving it out himself.

The final part of my argument for the irreducibility of humor to art will be presented in chapter four.

3.5: Answering the Questions of Prior Theories

Throughout this chapter, I have utilized insights from theories of humor that I have deemed incomplete in one way or another. One may object that this method is not only inconsistent with my claims, but that it invalidates my argument. This objection, however, forgets the fundamental compatibility and plurality of the symbolic forms. Every perspective, from every form, offers us insights into every other. The task of the philosopher of culture is to utilize insights from within all the forms to create a more complete, unified depth of understanding, a critique of culture that takes multiple perspectives into account for the purposes of better understanding the human experience, always grounded in the *factum*. Thus, it is not just appropriate to incorporate the insights of previous theories into my account, it is an obligation.

With this collective understanding of humor and the methodology of Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, we are granted the tools to create a unified theory of humor that answers the unanswerable questions of prior theories of humor. If humor is a symbolic form, it will never be understood by analysis from within any other symbolic form. The failure of previous theories is not that they give fundamentally incorrect answers; the failure is that they ask the fundamentally wrong questions. When a scientist asks about the nature of humor, she will proceed through the methodology determined as legitimate by science, and only accept evidence which meets the criteria of validity of science. For this reason, a scientist will investigate humor only as a scientific object and will only get results that reflect her scientific perspective. The same is true for the psychologist, the evolutionary theorist, the aesthete, and the linguist. But humor, while drawing from these, does not reduce to any one of them. Further, we cannot simply say that they are all correct and leave it at that – doing so would give us a collection of

features *about* humor and how it operates from several perspectives, but it would not give us an account of *humor itself*. Casting humor as a symbolic form give us answers, while making sense of the seemingly contradictory nature of the validity and invalidity of each theory.

With humor as a tool for symbolic interpretation, we are given a new horizon of access to understand our world. We will fail to understand objects of humor if we insist, as some theorists have, that it is simply impossible to find a unified or correct account of humor. But, as Appiah writes, "It is our imperfection that allows us to work, not with a single picture of the world, but with many" (Appiah 2017, 110).

3.6: Conclusion

By following the methodology of Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms, we understand humor in a new light, as its own class of human enterprise, an essential element in culture and human life. In casting humor as a symbolic form, we place it among art, language, and myth as an equal in necessity and import. We do not raise it above any form but insist on its presence horizontally among the rest. In this chapter I have argued that humor meets the criteria necessary to be called a symbolic form. I offered the negative argument for the existence of laws and logic unique to humor; the positive argument concerns the function of humor and will be detailed in the following chapter. Criteria (ii) and (iii) (a form must reveal information about an object of perception that is impossible to "see" from any other perspective) and (each form has one necessary function that defines the purpose of that form for human experience) were briefly summarized here and will also be given their due in the following chapter. I argued that humor is both immediate and intersubjectively constituted by utilizing the

insights of scientific, epistemological, and cultural theories of humor experience and transmission. I then gave evidence for the claim that humor has the capacity to interpret any and all objects of experience in its own terms.

Having shown that humor can indeed meet the criteria of a symbolic form, I proceeded to explore Cassirer's own understanding of humor, and defended against objections that humor can be subsumed under language, science, myth, or art (a more detailed argument for the distinction from art follows in chapter 4). I argued that the confusion within the history of humor theory can be credited to a misunderstanding of the foundational nature of humor as a symbolic form and offered that this history itself provides evidence for the argument that humor is not reducible to any other forms. As we continue, I will argue that understanding humor as a symbolic form gives us the conceptual tools to understand how humor operates in lived experience. In summary, I have argued for what humor *is*; we will see in the following chapter what it is that humor *does*.

THE FUNCTION OF HUMOR[8]

4.1: Introduction

In previous chapters, I have sketched the disagreement between scholars regarding the nature of humor and the contemporary disinterest in pursuing a unified theory. I have explored Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms as a solution to this problem; not by insisting on a to-the-letter reading of Cassirer, but rather by embracing his methodology in approaching cultural expressions. This method allows us to understand the persistence and power of humor's relationship to humanity, and, as we will see in the final chapter, gives us a means through which we can make objective claims about the power and potential moral implications of humor.

In this chapter I will conclude my argument that humor ought to be considered a symbolic form. First, I will argue that each theory of humor discussed in chapter one has an epistemic element crucial to its thesis, offering a curious commonality. Through phenomenological and contemporary political theory I will argue that this epistemological element can be understood as the unique function of the symbolic form of humor. In identifying the necessary function of humor, and its uniqueness from the function of all other forms, I will show how humor meets our last criteria from chapter 3, thus completing the argument for humor's status as a symbolic form.

4.2: The Epistemic Theme in Theories of Humor

[8] Portions of this chapter appear in Marra 2016.

As I argued in Chapter 3, humor theorists are deadlocked because each is operating within her particular form, a form which presupposes the answer to the question in the very way it chooses to formulate the question (Langer 1957, 3). That is, a psychologist is going to look for a psychological explanation, a feature or aberration within the subject, which would explain the phenomena of humor. She will discount evidence that does not operate within those parameters, believing them to be misguided or irrelevant for the purposes of answering the question of humor as she has phrased it. Psychologists such as Stephanie Davies (2013) will ask psychological questions and accept psychological answers, not the aesthetic answers of an art critic, the reductionist answers of a scientist, the linguistic answers of a polyglot, or the theoretical answers of a philosopher. Yet, in holding tight to her methods, her laws, and her logics, which are grounded in her form, she "misses something". Her theory may satisfy those within her field, but it will not satisfy anyone else, at least not completely. A linguist can review the psychologist's theory and conclude that there may be some truth to it, but that it is certainly not the whole story, and that their field can give a better account. This is not to say that the conclusions of theorists who are operating within a horizon other than that of humor will necessarily be *wrong*, nor that their views are necessarily incompatible. Rather, making sense of their insights, and making those insights compatible requires us to understand each theory as one of many perspectives. Instead of canceling each other out, so to speak, each theory gives us a new piece of the puzzle even though none can claim itself as the holistically true conclusion.

What do we learn from the history of humor theory? Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms allows us to understand that we need to collect the other parts of the story

from the other forms to get a fuller narrative. Once the philosopher has reviewed the hard work of others, then she can begin the reconstructive process that is determining the laws, logic, and function of humor. Let us pull apart the theories of humor we analyzed in Chapter 1 and find their shared theses, which I argue to be "revelation". If I am correct that something is being revealed in each case, that is, "told", "shown", "uncovered"; in other words, if it is the case that humor emancipates the mind from presuppositions, then we can focus on this feature, understand precisely what it is, how it works, and its necessity in relation to humor. In what follows, I offer that the revelations offered by humor can be a catalyst for emancipation, which, if we recall, is the ultimate aim of culture. In the next section, I turn to a discussion of culture's struggle for emancipation and humor's role in that struggle.

The theories of chapter one have revelation in common as the underlying requirement for their respective conclusions. Superiority theories claim that humor comes from reveling in hierarchies. Whether socially, politically, morally, economically, or spiritually, the Superiority theory claims that something is funny insofar as it pinpoints a power differential. Incongruity theories depend precisely on the bringing together of two otherwise incompatible elements. In doing so, humorous stimuli force one to consider a perspective in which these elements are brought together. Similarly, epistemic theories of humor insist that the experience of humor requires a shift, or oscillation, between two distinct belief sets. Evolutionary theories are explicit in their claim that humor originated as a survival technique in the human species; the pleasurable cognitive feature, which evolved into what we now call humor, existed solely for encouraging the species to question our knowledge before acting upon it. In the Benign Violation theory, cultural

and individual understandings of what is benign, and what is a violation, is revealed in the enjoyment or offense consequent of humorous stimuli. Empirical testing makes explicit the necessary conditions for humor itself: the appearance of threatening and nonthreatening representations brought together as a new experience. Finally, psychological theories claim that humor reveals opportunities for new attitudes and beliefs through the intentional disruption of negative thought patterns, preventing cyclical reinforcement of automated neural connections.

The single common feature shared by each theory of humor is that each insists on some sort of change in perspective as necessary. I argue that it is this common feature that points both to the possibility of the unification of theories and to the function of humor itself.

4.3: The Function of Humor

Cassirer's philosophy of symbolic forms is a functional ontology, not a substance ontology. The symbolic forms are not metaphysically real; they are functionally constituted transcendental forms of experience. For a form to be a form, it has to "do" something: "That system of forms is related to human consciousness which is in essence activity" (Hendel 1955, 56). This is what Cassirer means by the term function – the forms are functions of the human spirit, not substances in the world independent of human experience (Hendel 1955, 10, 43). "The universal function of art, for instance, is the same in an ancient and in a modern civilization and not only for man in the civilized condition but in prehistory as well. It is a human function and it persists in the history of mankind" (Hendel 1955, 43). Hendel continues: "This basic symbolic function has various 'natural' directions – and the symbolic forms are precisely those directions in which meaning is

realized in human consciousness…It abolishes the Kantian disparity between the regulative ideas and the constitutive forms – all are constitutive" (Hendel 1955, 52). Thus for Cassirer:

> [Symbolic forms] all do not function as a mere mirror that merely reflects the picture of something given of external or internal being, in the manner in which they are produced in it; rather they are, instead of such undifferentiated media, rather the actual sources of light, the conditions of seeing as well as the origins of all formations. (Cassirer 1955a 124)

The commonality between humor theories offers a clue to what I argue is humor's function. In other words, whatever humor *is*, the function of humor is an account of what humor *does* in culture. What humor *does*, I argue, is disrupt epistemic viciousness.

a. Epistemic Vice and Epistemic Virtue

I will proceed by defining what I mean by "revelation" and "disruption" by first employing Cassirer's understanding of the purpose of philosophy, or the recognition of the plurality of forms, and then through contemporary philosopher José Medina's definitions of epistemic vices and virtues.

Cassirer describes philosophy's role in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* as that which allows one to step outside of the forms and to understand the unity in their plurality:

> It is characteristic of philosophical knowledge as the "self-knowledge of reason" that it does not create a principally new symbol form, it does not found in this sense a new creative modality - but it grasps the

> earlier modalities as that which they are: as characteristic symbolic forms. (Cassirer 1996, 226)

When I view the world from within the form of science, I am blind to the idea that there may be other ways in which to interpret objects. I will dismiss claims of divine intervention, for example, because the criteria I use to judge the truth of a claim will never correlate to those of religion. I will not understand why what I consider objectively legitimate evidence is not accepted by my interlocutor. According to Cassirer, this is because I do not understand that the form from within which I am operating is only *one of many valid and legitimate* forms. What I am not understanding is that science is only one of many standpoints I may take. Cassirer explains:

> This tendency is introduced by the particular symbolic forms themselves. In the course of their development they all turn against their own "system of signs" - so religion turns against myth, cognitive inquiry against language, the scientific concept of causality against the sensory-anthropomorphic-mythic conception of causality, and so forth. (Ibid.)

Religion, like science, has its own criteria under which it judges the validity of a claim. From within the form of religion, reducing human life and experience to natural causes and scientific laws is to not only miss the point of the religious life, but it is to effectively miss the truth of human experience (Luft 2004: 32). Unless we understand that we are standing within different forms, we are doomed to talk past each other and to discount the importance and validity of the other's perspective. (It is precisely this "talking past each other" that has led to the impasse in humor theory.)

Philosophy is not itself a symbolic form; it is what we do when we “step back” and “see” the plurality of the forms. It allows us to recognize each form as unique in its laws, structure, and function, and to understand the criteria under which each form determines validity (Luft 2004, 37). Cassirer writes:

> But philosophy does not want to replace the older forms with another, higher form. It does not want to replace one symbol with another; rather, its task consists in comprehending the basic symbolic character of knowledge itself. We cannot cast off these forms, although the urge to do so is innate in us, but we can and must grasp and recognize their relative necessity. That is the only possible ideal liberation from the compulsion of symbolism. (Cassirer 1996, 226)

Because I operate in the world with a general unawareness and inattention to the forms from within which I am operating, it is not a given that I know or will discover that a multiplicity exists. Recognizing the forms *as forms* takes a great deal of reflection, reflection that is not inevitable. We live our lives habitually; if we are not confronted with a need to reflect on our immediate experience, it is almost guaranteed that we won’t bother. For philosophy to perform its function of unifying and legitimizing the totality of forms, we must first recognize that there *are* symbolic forms. This requires some sort of stimuli. Something must instigate an awakening from the complacency of my inattention to see a plurality. Only then can philosophy set about its work of unification. Cassirer continues:

> Such a compulsion is involved in every application of a positive form, in every positive "language". We cannot overcome it by casting off the

> symbolic forms as though they were some husk and then behold the "Absolute" face to face. Instead, we must *strive to comprehend every symbol in its place and recognize how it is limited and conditioned by every other symbol*. (Cassirer 1996, 226. Emphasis added)

Therefore, in Cassirer's system, a necessary condition for the possibility of philosophy, which functions to unify the forms, is the recognition of the forms *as forms*. This does not happen automatically or inevitably in human experience; on the contrary, it requires a *catalyst*, or, something that can *reveal* the forms for what they are. In what follows I will explore the work of José Medina who presents a view of epistemic liberation that works beautifully alongside of Cassirer's definition of philosophy.

i. José Medina and Epistemic Vice

Contemporary political theory is very interested in the unconscious epistemic limits we place on ourselves as we go about the world. It is a blindness, a disregard, and an ignorance of other possibilities beyond our own immediate experiences. Contemporary authors have focused on the dangerous effects of this way of epistemic operation in relation to oppressive cultural systems such as racism and sexism. In making the consequences of this sort of habit concrete, we are positioned to understand the depth and breadth of these habits within our sociocultural world.

In his book *The Epistemology of Resistance*, José Medina speaks of habitual closed-mindedness as an "epistemic vice" (Medina 2013, 34). He defines epistemic vices as "flaws that are not incidental or transitory, but *structural and systematic*: they involve attitudes deeply rooted in one's personality and cognitive functioning" and "harm the chances for epistemic improvement" (Medina 2013, 31). Furthermore, epistemic vices

impede one's ability to learn and improve; they "affect one's capacity to learn from others and from the facts; they inhibit the capacity of self-correction and of being open to correction from others" (Medina 2013, 31). In other words, epistemic vices are defensive habits one deploys when she is confronted with epistemically challenging information or experience. The habits are reinforced and supported through a lack of, immunity to, or disregard for consequences. These vices prevent one from self-knowledge, knowledge of others, and knowledge of the world; indeed, they create barriers to compassion, plurality, empathy, and sympathy. In sum, epistemic vices are at the root of intellectual stagnation and moral decay. Insofar as these vices are encouraged, endorsed, or (as is most often the case) ignored, intellectual and moral progress is impossible. Medina writes,

> The particular vice of epistemic closed-mindedness is when one's mental processing remains systematically closed to certain phenomena, experiences, and perspectives, come what may, and that closed-mindedness erodes reliability, epistemic trust, and one's general capacity to learn…[closed-mindedness is] a structural and systematic flaw of one's epistemic character...(Medina 2013, 34-35)

Medina's conception of closed-mindedness produces an *active* ignorance in the subject, an ignorance which requires *effort* to maintain "no matter what the evidence may be" (Medina 2013, 35). Medina describes racist and sexist attitudes as consequences of this closed-mindedness, one that does not originate in the subject exclusively but rather "from a socialization that leads one to be insensitive to certain things and immune to certain considerations" (Medina 2013, 36). Closed-mindedness is a defense mechanism often seen in those who enjoy sociopolitical privilege; they need to employ this vice in order to

preserve their self-conceptions and/or comfort with the world and their place within it. This impulse can instantiate in very real injustices, including violence against those oppressed persons and groups who are considered "unworthy of epistemic respect" (Medina 2013, 34).

Closed-mindedness is only one of the epistemic vices that Medina considers. The vices of epistemic arrogance and epistemic laziness are also culprits. He describes epistemic arrogance as a "kind of cognitive self-indulgence or cognitive superiority complex" (Medina 2013, 31). For example, a person who smokes cigarettes and is aware of the medical evidence of the harm they cause the body, yet denies the possibility that it has or will have negative side effects for *him*, displays epistemic arrogance. He is arrogant in claiming that he knows "better" than the overwhelming scientific evidence. While Medina believed in 2013 that pathological forms of epistemic arrogance are rare, we can see the actualization of this pathology within the "post-truth" political era in the United States. The contagious effect of epistemic arrogance could easily lead to nihilism, or an ethical egoism under which moral judgments are imparted and enforced only by those in positions of power and only against those whose punishment would benefit the decision-making bodies.

Epistemic laziness goes often goes hand in hand with arrogance, though not necessarily. Epistemic laziness is a "habitual lack of epistemic curiosity" which "atrophies one's cognitive attitudes and dispositions. Continual epistemic neglect," Medina argues, "creates blinders that one allows to grow around one's epistemic perspective, constraining and slanting one's vantage point" (Medina 2013: 33). We can understand those who hold tight to beliefs without ever having developed reasons for that

belief, or having done any investigative work about those beliefs, as epistemically lazy. We will see later in this chapter that a lack of curiosity is contrary to the wonder that Klaus Held and Rene Descartes believe is necessary to humor.

ii. Epistemic Virtue

For both Medina and Cassirer, dogmatism is the enemy of critical reasoning. Epistemic openness is not merely a precondition for philosophy; it is a precondition for personal and social growth. As Cassirer explains, "Where there is no intellectual freedom, there is no place for beauty; the phenomenon of the beautiful can arise only out of and in the presence of freedom" (Cassirer 1955a, 196). Reflective engagement is epistemic virtue for Medina: "a character trait that constitutes an epistemic advantage for the individual who possesses it… roughly, a set of attitudes and dispositions that facilitate the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge" (Medina 2013, 30). Medina focuses on three epistemic virtues, mirror-images of the aforementioned vices: humility rather than arrogance, curiosity/diligence rather than laziness, and open- rather than closed-mindedness (Medina 2013, 42). Let's take them in order. Medina describes epistemic humility as an "attentiveness to one's cognitive limitations and deficit…a humble and self-questioning attitude" (Medina 2013, 43). This attitude allows one to have healthy doubt regarding one's own beliefs and judgments; it allows one to see inconsistencies in one's own thought processes, to create and strengthen arguments to support one's beliefs, to identify missing premises and poor reasoning, to question oneself and others, etc. These qualities are necessary for learning about oneself, others, and the world. Epistemic humility is a necessary condition for the development of good epistemic character.

Closely related to humility is the epistemic virtue of curiosity/diligence. Curiosity is what motivates us to ask questions and evaluate our beliefs. Without curiosity, we would allow false information to infiltrate our epistemic network without examination, and viciously refuse to evaluate this information once adopted. It is with humility that we become open to the possibility of being wrong, or needing to revise, and it is curiosity that drives the motivation to learn more (Medina 2013, 43).

Because recognition of mistakes is often an unpleasant process, those with epistemic humility and curiosity diligently investigate their past and present knowledge, actively seeking corrective information to avoid such unpleasantness in the future. Doing so requires the third virtue: epistemic open-mindedness. Open-mindedness allows one to correct or better align their knowledge through a willingness and ability to inhabit perspectives different from their own; that is, to understand their viewpoint as one of many, and to intentionally investigate alternative viewpoints (Medina 2013, 44). This is what Cassirer describes as philosophical thinking: one must be open to the idea that other perspectives, or symbolic forms, exist to discover those perspectives. Only through open-mindedness is the opportunity of inhabiting alternative perspectives possible.[9]

Epistemic virtues disrupt the delusions that are calcified through epistemic vice. Being epistemically humble, curious, and open are necessary conditions for the possibility of philosophy for Cassirer, and of learning itself for Medina. These epistemic virtues deny the possibility of certainty in one perspective and deny the existence of a hierarchy of symbolic forms, and in so doing deny the validity of imperialistic or

[9] Perhaps also apt is Gadamer's position here, which he also calls hermeneutic humility: the assumption in a conversation that the other could be right and I wrong – an insight owed to Sebastian Luft.

dogmatic reasoning. These virtues can only be developed by one who has either been freed from epistemic vice or had never developed such vices in the first place. In the next section I argue that the revelation of the existence of the epistemic vices described here are triggered by the symbolic form of humor, and that this revelation is in fact the unique function of this symbolic form.

b. Humor and Epistemic Virtue

In this section, I will argue that humor meets criterion (iii) from chapter 3, which states that in order to be understood as a symbolic form, humor must have one necessary function that defines the purpose of that form for human experience. To do this, we must bring together what we have learned from philosophers and empirical scientists. Recall, one must recognize the forms as forms (for Cassirer) to break the cycle of epistemic vice and work toward epistemic virtue, and this requires a catalyst. In what follows I argue that humor's necessary and unique function is to act as an "epistemic check", on dogmatic thinking. To borrow Cassirer's words in reference to classic comedians, "Arrogant seriousness, when seen through the spectacles of Shakespearean humour, becomes mere pomposity; and false grandeur becomes grandiosity" (Cassirer 1955a, 179). Humor is not meant to mock: "Thus humour is not directed against the seriousness of knowledge or against the dignity of religion; but simply against a mistaken seriousness and an arrogated dignity, against pedantry and bigotry" (Cassirer 1955a, 183). "Mistaken seriousness", "arrogated dignity", and "pedantry and bigotry" are the epistemic vices Medina claims block learning. Humor reveals these epistemic vices that Medina argues are at the root of oppressive sociocultural systems; this, we will see in more detail later, places humor directly in line with the aim of culture itself: humanity's self-liberation (see

section III in chapter 5). Crucially, while other catalysts may exist for this sort of confrontation, I argue that this function is the condition for the possibility for humor itself. What follows is support for this argument from empirical and philosophical investigations.

Humor has a scientific reputation for enhancing critical and creative thinking, both things which phenomenologists would certainly say are essential for philosophizing. McGraw and Warner cite psychologist Alice Isen's 1987 study to show that participants who watched a blooper reel were more likely to solve a challenging puzzle using creative methods than the control group. More recent studies show a correlation between humor and open-mindedness and self-transcendence (or objectivity), acting as a liberating force from one's tightly held ideologies and presuppositions (Isen 2001, Davies 2013). These are precisely the sort of virtues necessary to transcend dogmatism.

Philosophically, the relationship between humor and the confrontation of dogmatism has been approached from multiple perspectives. Klaus Held offers that the catalyst may be found in the mood called wonder. He says that the reason one commits to philosophy is interest, but "this interest is aroused for its part by motives which consciousness is not the master". He explains:

> philosophical and scientific thought arose from wonder (in Greek, thaumazein). But wonder is a mood. The fundamental trait of this mood is the astonishment with which we become aware of this world as world...The genesis of philosophy and science was an unpredictable accident - the accident that a mood appeared on the scene which motivated making the world itself thematic.

The mood of wonder is what Held believes is that which opens the flood gates, so to speak, to philosophy.

This is a very interesting, and very important, insight into our discussion. If Held's impulse is correct and wonder is a catalyst, then humor has a found an ally, for wonder has long been tied to both philosophy and humor. Rene Descartes describes wonder as that which comes over us when we confront an object that "surprises us" due to being "novel" or "very different from what we formerly knew or from what we supposed ought to be" (Descartes 1984, 563). This is the only passion, Descartes says, which has no opposite "for, if the object before us has no characteristics that surprise us, we are not moved by it at all and we consider it without passion" (Descartes 1984, 563). Morreall argues that "[h]ad Descartes explored the relation of laughter to wonder itself ...he might will have developed a version of the Incongruity Theory". He goes on: "Had he extended his theorizing by considering incongruity as a type of novelty, it would have been a short step to the idea of laughter as caused by our surprise at some incongruity" (Morreall 1987, 21).

Descartes' analysis extends beyond the incongruity to the *function* of wonder, which, according to Descartes, is to point out error. Amy Schmitter explains:

> a person may remain satisfied simply because he fails to realize that he lacks knowledge, even when that knowledge is easily had... [we might ask] whether she has experienced the sort of despair and unease that arises from doubt and motivates us to resolve doubt. (Schmitter 2002, 104)

Amelie Rorty echoes this insight: “It is the emotions, and particularly the emotion of wonder, that energize science and gives it direction” (Rorty 1992, 386). Descartes, for his part, counts "gentle mockery" as a moral virtue, saying:

> When a person shows up vice in their proper light by making them appear ridiculous without laughing at them and without showing any hatred for those who have them, he engages in that gentle mockery which is not a passion, but rather the trait of a good man. It bears witness of the cheerfulness of his temper and the tranquility of his soul, which are signs of virtue; and it often shows the quickness of his mind, in his ability to put a pleasant gloss on the objects of his mockery. (Descartes 1984, 180)

For Descartes, humor plays an important epistemic role.

But let us return now to Held. Wonder is a mood which serves as a catalyst for transcendence from our default dogmatisms – the first step to the philosophical perspective. Wonder is closely connected with humor and closely connected to philosophy. This amounts to the following: humor gives rise to wonder, which *can* (but may not) give rise to philosophy. Humor jars us from complacency and opens epistemic room for attentiveness. This can prime us for philosophy, but may not. It is ultimately up to us to further explore the revelations humor gives us.

As for Cassirer himself, his stance on humor follows much the same pattern. Cassirer’s view is highly influenced by Hermann Cohen, who Gregory Moynahan holds the view that

> comedy leads us to expect reversals in structural form, and to pay attention to this horizon of meaning in any dialogic form of meaning…comedy

> reveals a universal form of logic at work in all human activity…canceling obvious conclusions and frustrating expectation. (Moynahan 2013, 19)

Moynahan draws attention to Cassirer's use of humor in his own work for precisely these purposes, suggesting that this use of a comic style in his writing is a performative example of the "multivariant development of possibilities" and "lack of closure", which is highly consistent with the philosophy of symbolic forms as a whole (Moynahan 2013, 20-21). As Lofts explains, philosophy of culture is an ongoing project for Cassirer, one which must reflect and understand culture *as it is now*, from an always contemporary perspective, interpreting and reinterpreting the culture within which one is embedded (Lofts 2000, 14-15). I add that humor can assist in reminding one to avoid complacency of past interpretation and instead use all of her resources to inform her knowledge of the world.

Recall Cassirer's analysis in *The Platonic Renaissance in England*. Cassirer refers to particular characters in comedy as exposing "genuinely symbolic and humorous truth", stating that "humor becomes the touchstone of the true and the false of the genuine and the counterfeit, of the essential and the merely conventional" (Cassirer 1953, 181). This is a crucially important role for Cassirer, for "objective truth is attainable only through truth towards oneself, through truthfulness in the individual" (Cassirer 1953, 157). This is an impossible perspective if one is dogmatic or skeptical, both of which are signs of "moral degeneracy of human nature" (Cassirer 1953, 162). When Cassirer treats comedy in *Essay on Man*, he says "in comic perspective all things begin to take on a new face. We are perhaps never nearer to our human world than in the works of the great comic writer" (Cassirer 1944a, 150). The function of humor as revelatory is echoed once again.

Taken together, I argue that humor's function is to encourage one to see the world from a different perspective, which requires a break from epistemic viciousness. This break can lead to wonder, a desire to seek after knowledge. This mood of wonder is, for Held, what can catapult one to committing oneself to a genuine life (that is, to philosophy), and for Cassirer a necessary condition for the possibility of a critique of culture. One may then ask, if humor gives rise to wonder and wonder to philosophy, then what gives rise to humor? There are two ways in which we can answer this question: as a phenomenologist, I could argue that the question is misguided; humor is always already a product of the human spirit, an a priori symbolic form. It has no more genesis than religion, myth, or language - it is already and unavoidably within lived experience. As an empirical scientist, I would answer the question in terms of evolutionary biology as Hurley et. al. and others have, claiming that humor developed for error detection and has evolved, as human enterprises do, into the variety we experience in the every day.[10] And, of course, the theory of evolutionary origins of humor 1) explains the universality of humor, which strengthens its status as a symbolic form, 2) provides an evolutionary basis for my placing it on the level of forms such as language and myth which have their own distinct evolutionary origins, and 3) presents another perspective through which to

[10] Biologists Matthew Gervais and David Sloan Wilson give a very similar conclusion in their extensive account of the evolution of humor in their 2005 study. They claim that proto-humor – rough-and-tumble play, tickling, etc. (399) – evolved in 2 Mya, prior to language (419) as a recognition of "nonserious social incongruity" (399). That humor emerged prior to language further distinguishes the form of humor from that of language. Matthew Gervais and David Sloan Wilson, "The Evolution and Functions of Laughter and Humor: A Synthetic Approach". *The Quarterly Review of Biology* 80 (4) (2005): 395-430.

understand how humor may act as a catalyst for epistemic virtue. Recall their argument that humor evolved as a way of rewarding the recognition of error.

To be clear, the *resolution* of that error, I maintain, is *not* the work of humor. Humor is merely a signpost which can point us toward these virtues, but it does not and cannot force us to walk the path. Perhaps the seed that began with rewarding recognition of error split into two distinct strands of uniquely human enterprises: that of humor, or the recognition of error, and that of philosophy, the resolution of that error. The similarities between the performance of philosophy and the performance of humor would be further explained if they shared an evolutionary origin. For it seems that the reward system which encouraged us to recognize error rather than go boldly forward with an unmerited belief could be the same system which encouraged human beings to engage in reflection in the first place. This system could be, in Heldian and Cartesian terms, what opened epistemic space for wonder. Of course, this claim is speculative at best, though is certainly a direction in which this research can continue.

4.4: Connections between Theory and Practice

Of course, theoretical argumentation is incomplete without empirical evidence to support it; this is nonnegotiable not only for Cassirer but, as I argued in 2017a, for any investigation of humor. Any discussion of functionality "focuses on the 'reciprocal relation' between sensual and spiritual (*sinnlich* and *sinnhaft*), which is overcome by the functional account, insofar as we understand that 'the pure function of the spiritual must find its concrete fulfillment in the sensual'" (Cassirer 1955a, 19). Clearer still, in *Essay on Man* he writes, "We must examine all the available empirical evidence" to get clear on what the forms are and thus what the human being is – an essence which he stresses is

definitionally functional rather than substantial (Cassirer 1944a, 68). What follows is a series of examples that show that humor functions to disrupt epistemic vice. Of course, these examples are not exhaustive, and cannot be; they are also limited in kind for the sake of clarifying my argument as precisely as possible. Examples from stand-up comedy, word-play (puns), satire, and absurdity follow.[11]

Humor can show us what we take for granted, and that even those things that we think we know is always up for revision. See Louis CK's bit on airline travel:

> People on planes are the worst... They make it sound like they were on a cattle car in Poland in the 40's... I had to sit on the runway for 40 minutes!...Oh my god, really, what happened then, did you fly through the air like a bird incredibly? Did you soar into the clouds impossibly? Did you partake in the miracle of human flight? And then land softly on giant tires that you couldn't even conceive of how they put air into them? How dare you, bitching about flying! ...You're sitting in a chair in the sky! You're like a Greek myth right now! (CK 2010)

The complacency with which we expect or feel entitled to certain events creates a metablindness that prevents us from recognizing the luxury, convenience, and majesty of airplane travel. This revelation can lead to a number of philosophical investigations, from the effect of capitalism on identity to pathological adult egocentricity. Of course, this bit cannot *make* us ask such questions, but the bit itself relies on the precondition that we have become epistemically lazy regarding matters of airline travel. In other words, the

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[11] While my choice of examples here are verbal, nonverbal humor relies on the same mechanisms. Charlie Chaplin, for example, used his body to poke holes in our lazy assumptions regarding the physical possibilities of the human body and what would we could consider "normal" or "natural" emotive expression, as seen in the following clip from *Modern Times* 1936: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PxEud-DqJ64

joke wouldn't "work" if everyone already "knew" that airplane travel is an enormous technological achievement (and by "know" here I mean "kept in conscious awareness"). In other words, this joke is only funny because it shows us something from a perspective that we did not already have, and that revelation allows us to reflect on that perspective.

Standup comedy is the genre of humor in which the function presents itself in the most interesting way, as the comedian's act could change and evolve depending on the reactions of the audience, though we can locate the function in each other instantiation of humor. Puns reveal non-obvious double meanings in ordinary language: in the film *Snow Cake*, when Alan Rickman's character is asked if he needs assistance in an eyeglass store, he replies no, that he is simply "eye-browsing". The pun breaks us of our lazy understanding of the terms "eye-brows" and "browsing", connecting two categories which occupy very different spaces in our minds. With the context of the location of an eyeglass store and the reference to eyes, the pun connects layers of compatible yet unrecognized language oddities and meaning into an assault on epistemic complacency. While the layers of this pun are complex, it is not difficult for an English speaker to understand – the words, situations, and categories are all commonly known, which makes this a particularly clear example. The ease with which this pun is comprehended by the average person creates an automatic disruption in epistemic understanding, forcing a reconsideration of default meanings.

Satire takes small character traits, ideas, or connotations and magnifies them for the purposes of exposing hidden qualities. For years, Fox News was portrayed by political comedy show *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* as the headquarters of "Bullshit Mountain" (Freeman 2015). By focusing on, for example, the news channel's tendency to

change opinion based on the person associated with an idea rather than the idea itself, Jon Stewart and his team would create compilations of correspondents, anchors, and politicians contradicting themselves. The organization of these clips in rapid-fire cuts make the joke clear – a news organization that claims to be concerned only in the truth in fact has no interest in it. Absurdity breaks down common cultural beliefs and practices and shows them to be illogical. In the comedy *Hysteria*, set in Britain in 1880, hysteria is was considered a women's disease (Wexler 2011); the symptoms are those of normal, human sexual frustration, but admitting so would go against the popular scientific thesis that women have no sexual desire and a wandering uterus. The doctors in the film "cure" the disease by inventing the vibrator.

We can see in each of these cases that humor functions to disrupt a habitual perspective. This function can encourage epistemic virtue. This is not to say that humor is the *only* catalyst for the development of these virtues, rather, only that humor is one of them, and it so happens that it is an *essential* function of humor while it is accidental to other forms.

4.5: Concluding the Argument for Humor as a Symbolic Form

In chapter three, I argued that humor meets the qualifications of a symbolic form in the following ways: 1) humor has its own internal laws and logic distinct from other forms; 2) humor is dynamic and intersubjectively constituted; and 3) humor has the capacity to interpret any and all objects of experience in its own terms. In this chapter, I argued that humor has one necessary function that defines the purpose for that form in human experience, satisfying a fourth criterion. To conclude my argument for humor as a symbolic form, I will make explicit the uniqueness of the function of the form of humor

by showing the differences between its function and the function of other forms as Cassirer understands them. While he argues that all symbolic forms aim to bring the human spirit closer to liberation, how each form goes about guiding the human spirit toward this goal is exclusive to that form: "in spite of all of the differences and oppositions existing among its various forms, these are, nevertheless, all working toward a common end" (Cassirer 1944: 70). The forms that Cassirer identifies are myth, language, science (reason), and art. I will proceed by showing how each of these forms' defining functions are fundamentally distinct from that of humor, and therefore the impulse to categorize humor as if it were reducible to another form rises from category mistakes.

Myth functions to interpret and emotionalize our empirical perceptions. Emotion, Cassirer explains, is what makes myth what it is: "The world of myth is a dramatic world – a world of actions, of forces, of conflicting powers…Mythical perception is always impregnated with these emotional qualities" (Cassirer 1944a, 76). Directing our emotions for the purposes of understanding and interpreting our immediate experience is the function of myth, which is not grounded in reason, but rather belief (Cassirer 1944a, 75). Myth functions to give expressive meaning to the human experience. As Michael Friedman explains, "It is this type of meaning that underlies mythical consciousness, for Cassirer, and which explains its most distinctive feature, namely, its total disregard for the distinction between appearance and reality" (Friedman 2017).

Humor can have a similar disregard, but we see especially in the subsets of satire and parody that the distinction between the two is the very point in generating humor in the first place. Satire demands that we separate appearance from reality, that we break the

spell of what is immediate and question the underlying truth. Thus we cannot claim that humor is the same as, or a subset of, mythological consciousness. When it comes to the affective aspect of myth it is easy to take for granted that humor fits this description, but this conclusion rests on the category mistake of confusing the cause, humor, with the common emotional affect, amusement. Mythological thinking, on the contrary, produces and channels a *variety* of emotional responses which are not limited to a specific emotional category. It would be illogical to categorize humor as reducible to myth. Humor's function is not to create a particular emotional affect. It may cause this affect, but it's not why humor exists. Besides, if it were true that humor's function is to create an emotional affect, any emotional affect would do, and any sort of humor which did not produce an emotional state would no longer be categorized as humor. If this were true, then the joke I still find funny, even if I have heard the joke so much that I become emotionally neutral to it, would no longer qualify as humor. It would be require us to retroactively recategorize the joke as some other kind of thing, or make the claim that the same joke has somehow transitioned from one category to the other based on only on my subjective experience of it. Thus, while it is true that humor can assist in categorizing and externalizing emotional states, it is not a necessary or definitional function of humor to do so. It is an accidental, rather than necessary, feature of humor. The function of humor is therefore not the same as the function of myth.

Language and science serve distinct functions from humor. Language has representative symbolic meaning; its function is to represent thought. Friedman explains, "it is primarily through the medium of natural language that we construct the 'intuitive world' of ordinary sense perception on the basis of what Cassirer calls intuitive space and

intuitive time" (Friedman 2017). In other words, Cassirer isolates the function of language as the precondition for understanding ourselves in spatio-temporal relationships. In doing so, language allows us to express our subjective life in the objective world and in connection to others. Language and myth make up the foundation for other cultural forms, and language serves the purpose of "creating" space and time. The function of language is unique to language and cannot be claimed as a necessary or sufficient condition of humor, and humor, while often utilizing language, cannot be reduced to it.

Science functions for the exact opposite end as myth: "it is precisely here, in the scientific view of the world, that the pure relational concepts…are finally freed from the bounds of sensible intuition". Friedman continues, "[in scientific thinking] the intuitive concept of substantial thing has finally been replaced by the relational-functional concept of universal law" (Friedman 2017). Science functions to make objective the external world, rather than to externalize the subjective world as in myth. While scientists have tried to understand humor purely in scientific terms, doing so can only yield objective data and therefore can give at best an incomplete picture of the experience of humor in the subjective and emotional sense. Even the empirical studies of McGraw and Warren must concede that science cannot yield predictive methods for the effect of humorous stimuli on the individual. Senses of humor vary. Furthermore, humor is not limited to objective, external stimuli. Stephanie Davies' psychological studies insist that, with practice, we can transform distressing stimuli to humorous stimuli entirely through cognitive behavioral therapy (Davies 2013). In other words, Davies argues that a negative external stimulus can become humorous through repeated, intentional subjective reassociations. Therefore, while some humor is indeed dependent on an external object to

stimulate it, not all aspects of humor yield scientifically measurable data. It is thus impossible to reduce humor to the symbolic form of science as science's function cannot be described as a necessary precondition for humor.

Humor is often understood by its cultural creators as an art form, and not without plenty of aesthetic examples: the comedies of Aristophanes; the satire of the case with Jonathan Swift; the performances in *The Colbert Report* television show; jesters and clowns complete with costume; stand-up comedians today have artistic hands in everything from writing to acting to directing in addition to the typical rhetorical performances on the stage (Borges 2018). But humor cannot be reduced to art. In *Essay on Man* Cassirer explains that the symbolic form of art was appropriately described by Kant when he wrote: "aesthetic contemplation is [quoting Kant] 'entirely indifferent to the existence or nonexistence of its object" (Cassirer 1944a, 75). Humor cannot be described in this way; just as it would be incorrect to describe humor scientifically, as if the category were purely empirical, it is also incorrect to reduce the category as purely subjective or indifferent to empirical reality. In fact, the instantiations of humor that are most commonly categorized as artistic expression – comedy, satire, clowning, and stand-up – are very concerned with the external world. Greek comedies are not without an element of social commentary, satire exists to exaggerate existent ideas/individuals/groups, jesters and clowns rely on their physical bodies and props, and stand-up comedians overwhelmingly ground their sets in lived experience. So we see again that it is the equivocation of humor with the objects of humor that may lead one to reduce humor itself to art.

Cassirer himself fell victim to this equivocation in his chapter on art in *Essay on Man.* What he writes of "comic art" must be quoted at length:

> Comic art possesses in the highest degree that faculty shared by all art, sympathetic vision. By virtue of this faculty it can accept human life with all its defects and foibles, its follies and vices. Great comic art has always been a sort of *encomium moriae*, a praise of folly. In comic perspective all things begin to take on a new face. We are perhaps never nearer to our human world than in the works of a great comic writer…We become observant of the minutest details; we see this world in all its narrowness, its pettiness, and silliness. We live in this restricted world, but we are no longer imprisoned by it. Such is the peculiar character of the comic catharsis. Things and events begin to lose their material weight; scorn is dissolved into laughter and laughter is liberation. (Cassirer 1944a: 150)

There are several layers to pull apart here. First, if it is true that comic writing brings us as near as possible to our human world, then humorous contemplation certainly is not indifferent to that world in the same way as aesthetic contemplation. If comic writing shows us the realities of the world, taking pains to do so, with explicit intention, for the sake of revealing minute details of the world and the pettiness therein, then it is not indifferent to the existence of these things. For this reason, we cannot follow Cassirer in claiming that art is indifferent to the existence of the world and that humor is reducible to a type of art.

Secondly, accepting the conditions of the world may be the goal of some comic writers, but it is not the goal of many instantiations of humor. So too are many

instantiations of humor in pure praise of folly, but others are explicitly against the idea of folly for folly's sake – Arish Singh, a Chicago-based Sikh comedian, is explicit that his comedy aims to disrupt the expectations of comedy and to shame comedians who use their gifts for "cheap laughs", or "hack" comedy (Singh 2016). The term "hack" is a derogatory term in the comedy community, used to discredit or insult unoriginal, lazy material. Bits about the superficial differences between sexes or races are often described as "hack", as well as the "dick and fart" variety of joke (Alexander et al. 2017). Hack, then, can be described as the sort of comedy that aims only to get a laugh through unsophisticated silliness. Singh, for his part, parodies and satirizes Jeff Dunham (Singh 2016), the ventriloquist comedian and inventor of "Achmed the Dead Terrorist". The puppet is a skeleton with a turban, and Dunham (with an exaggerated Middle Eastern accent) has the puppet threaten to kill everyone so he can earn his 72 virgins (Dunham 2015). According to Singh, this bit, like all hack, does nothing new or interesting. It does not reflect, it is not self-conscious; all it does is trade on tired stereotypes and increasingly hostile attitudes toward turban-wearing men. Hack comedy is lazy comedy. That "hack" is its own term in the world of stand-up comedy is itself testament to the fact that not all humor does, or aim to, celebrate folly for folly's sake alone.

Third, Cassirer is correct, as I have argued, that within a comic perspective (understanding "comic" as restricted to comedy *or* as encompassing humor itself) "all things begin to take on a new face" and that humor is liberating, but for entirely different reasons than those insinuated here. The perspective granted by humor can lead to epistemic virtues of humility, open-mindedness, and curiosity, and disrupts the calcification of epistemic vices. Humor allows new perspectives on oneself and others,

allowing one to see the world as having "a new face". But this new face is not limited to reducing the world and all of its contents to mere silliness. The epistemic effect of humor can open one to contemplation of the very critical and serious matters to which Singh turns our attention. Furthermore, the liberation of humor does not come from laughter – we know laughter is a physiological phenomenon that has no necessary connection to humor, and we know that liberating humor can stimulate epistemic growth even without that physiological reaction. Furthermore, it is incorrect to say that laughter dissolves scorn – it is sometimes the case that laughter is a result of feeling scorn toward on object, as Plato indicated. Laughter can indeed provide catharsis, but again, this bodily event is not the category of humor. The sort of epistemic openness influenced by humor can be cathartic I suppose, if one had epistemic tension without a target or release valve, but it can also create new tensions and anxieties as a result of losing the arrogance and ignorance of epistemic vice.

Cassirer's understanding of comic writing as an instantiation of art is not a refutation of my argument. When viewed from within the symbolic form of art, as Cassirer is, comic composition may indeed be accurately described in this passage. But humor itself is not. We see glimpses of insight into the power of humor in human life, but we do not see Cassirer make the distinction between humor as a category (even if he would not recognize it as a symbolic form) and comedy as a genre. This oversight places him alongside many other thinkers and performers, but this is nonetheless a reduction that does not give proper attention to, or appreciation for, the powerful way in which humor operates as its own cultural force *alongside of*, rather than subordinate to, the symbolic form of art. Additionally, revisiting the passages where Cassirer distinguishes art from

play gives us the most substantial proof that humor is not reducible to art. The empirical fact is that play is connected to the development of humor preferences. Cassirer is clear that the goal of play, which carries through as it evolves into the adult sense of humor, are at odds with that of art. Return to section V. b. in chapter 3 to revisit these passages in Cassirer.

4.6: Conclusion

Epistemic viciousness is the enemy of learning, forcefully refuses to entertain others, stubbornly rejects subjectivity of others, and transforms the (properly understood) *human* project into an *individual* one. In this way epistemic viciousness harms and damages the human imagination and the goal of culture.[12] Against such an enemy, humanity would need a symbolic form *whose job it is* to disrupt this vice. The freedom that is gained through the revelation of epistemic mistakes opens the possibility for personal and sociocultural improvement that is necessary for humanity to progress toward liberation. "When [mistaken seriousness and arrogated dignity] entrench themselves behind a false gravity," he says,

> nothing remains but to subject them to the test of ridicule and so to expose them. Then only will knowledge and piety appear in their true character, which is not inconsistent with the enjoyment of life, which, on the contrary, is the finest expression of the enjoyment of life and of an affirmative attitude towards the world. (Cassirer 1953, 184)

[12] My thanks to Myron Jackson for guidance on this point.

This passage was written with someone like Hitler in mind, and, perhaps, Charlie Chaplin's depiction of Hitler as a ridiculing and exposing force.[13]

The liberation described in the disruption of seriousness will be explored in detail in the final chapter of this dissertation. There I will be clear about two issues: first, what is ultimately at stake in understanding humor as a powerful cultural force, and second, how the methodology of the symbolic forms may offer us a unique entry into normative discussions of humor.

[13] My thanks to Sebastian Luft for this connection, who informed me that it is likely that Cassirer knew of *The Great Dictator*.

TOWARD AN OBJECTIVE ETHIC OF HUMOR[14]

5.1: Introduction

Thus far, I have argued that humor is a symbolic form, that understanding it as such solves the problems of contemporary and historical humor theory by providing a unified foundation for humor, and that the function of this form is to catalyze a reevaluation of epistemic habit (purging oneself of epistemic vice and nurturing epistemic virtues). In this chapter, I will argue that understanding humor in this way gives us the conceptual space to understand the power of humor in human life. It is without question that humor has dramatic effects on our interpersonal and sociopolitical relationships, as we saw in chapters 1 and 3. The empirical evidence tells us that humor effects our world; in some ways this is positive, as in creating bonding relationships between individuals, and in some ways this is negative, as in cases of drawing social lines. It is in this context that we can see most clearly the *idealization* guiding the use of the humor. This idealization, I suggest, can guide us toward an objective ethic of humor.

There are three basic positions one could take when asking moral questions about humor: a subjective position, an exemption position, or an objective position. A subjective position would argue that one simply can't determine whether a joke is right or wrong without taking the specific circumstances, persons, and/or reactions into account. An exemption position would be to say that humor is special mode of interaction where normal moral rules don't apply, and therefore there can be no such thing as a right or wrong joke. An objective position would be to say that moral standards can be

[14] Portions of this chapter will appear in Marra Forthcoming.

universally applied to humor and do not rely on the intention of the speaker or the reaction of the audience to the humorous event.

In this chapter, I will argue that the objective approach is the only justifiable means of making moral claims about humor, and introduce a way to begin the hard work of developing such an approach. As we saw in chapter 2, a critical philosophy of culture requires both objectivity and subjective interpretation (see section II. b.). The objective element includes the *factum* of experience (the joke) and the subjective interpretation of the embodied interpreter. No cultural study will be successful if analyses of it is purely subjective with no objective ground. We have argued in the last chapter that humor helps us struggle toward liberation by performing a special cultural function, the disruption of epistemic vice, and in this way is an important piece of the larger human story. My project here is to offer an objective frame for asking moral questions of humor, thus following the best practices of Cassirer's methodology.

5.2: The Trouble with Subjective and Exemption Approaches

Scholars and comedians alike seem to favor subjective or exemption approaches to moral questions about humor. A purely subjective approach argues that humor is a matter of taste. My sense of humor, and therefore what I think is moral and immoral when it comes to jokes, is specific to me. I might find a joke funny that you find offensive – neither of us are right or wrong, per se, we just have different preferences when it comes to comedy. With this approach, it's not necessarily the *joke* that holds moral content, it's really more a matter of the person telling the joke, the person hearing the joke, the context in which the joke was told, or a combination of these factors. For example, say I tell the following joke:

I like my beer like I like my violence: domestic. (Burr 2014)

A subjectivist would begin determining the moral value of this joke by considering the fact that I, the person telling the joke, am a woman. I surely wouldn't be making fun of violence against women, or trying to demean myself, a woman, in the telling. They would also consider whether I have experienced domestic violence – this requires far more information than just the subjective experience of the event. If I or someone close to me has survived domestic violence, it is likely that the subjectivist would determine that I would never seriously find such a thing funny, so I'm not doing anything morally wrong in telling this joke. Perhaps. But, all these beings equal, he could also say that domestic violence is simply never funny and the joke is immoral. Both interpretations would be equally valid for the subjectivist as subjective opinion is the basis for moral judgment. If a man told the joke, the subjectivist could question the moral intent simply because the teller is typically (though certainly not always) the perpetrator of domestic violence, not the victim. Or he could say the man was moral in telling the joke because he drew attention to an important issue. The subjectivist may also ask who heard the joke to make the determination. If the joke was heard by women or victims of abuse, then the subjectivist would ask if the audience felt harmed by it If they did not, then the joke caused no harm and therefore was not unethical. If they did, then the joke did cause harm and should not have been told. Or, maybe not. Utilitarian calculations aren't the standard against which we measure moral value for the subjectivist.

The fact that any judgment is equally morally justified, even those in direct contradiction, tells us that the approach is absurd. It would be impossible for a comedian to write a joke that is immune to offense from someone somewhere, since anyone could

have any reason to find the joke morally wrong. The Marburg method would reject this approach immediately. If we look at the fact of the event, the joke, its moral value (whatever that may be) cannot change based upon purely subjective interpretation. If the act of telling the joke can be moral to one interpreter and immoral to another, then the *joke* is not what is determining the action's moral value. Rather, it is the *interpreter* that changes the moral value. And if the moral value of the joke is dependent upon the audience, then the *interpreter* is the moral agent here. But if the interpreter is the acting moral agent, then the interpreter is responsible for the moral value of joke. And if that is the case, then we would never be justified in placing moral blame on the joke's teller – the blame can only be justly placed blame interpreter who must have *chosen* to deem the joke moral or immoral. And that is absurd. But the subjectivist can't see this absurdity; they can only say that the teller just has a different sense of humor than the interpreter, and both parties are entitled to their respective preferences. Because neither preference can hold any more moral value than would the preference of ice cream flavors, there would be no ethical reason for the teller to limit his jokes to any preference, and furthermore no moral responsibility to do so. This doesn't concern the subjectivist, but it should concern us. While we know that interpretation is always subjective, our methodology insists that we ground interpretations in objective facts. This means, as a critical philosopher of culture, the objective must be present in any analysis.

The subjective approach dismissed, I will move on to the exemption approach. The approach claims that jokes are jokes, not to be taken seriously, and ought not be judged by ordinary moral standards. This approach is very popular among comedians. For example, in a 2013 debate moderated by *Totally Biased* host W. Kamau Bell,

comedians Jim Norton and Lindy West argued for and against the moral exemption of the comedian to tell jokes about any subject, and specifically rape, without fear of negative repercussions. Norton takes the former position. Norton claims that life is full of very serious and very tragic events, and that human beings need relief from these pressures in order to maintain psychological well-being: "The relief of comedy is that it takes things that aren't funny and it allows us to laugh about them for an hour and then you have the rest of the day to look at them like they're as horrible and sad as they really are" ("Totally Biased: Extended Talk with Jim Norton and Lindy West - Video Dailymotion" n.d.) Comedy must remain a socially acceptable way to get that relief, and censorship and/or moral condemnation of comedy will result in robbing audiences and comedians alike of crucial and necessary psychological relief. We should grant comedians the moral leniency to joke about even the most serious subjects without fear of monetary or social condemnation in order to preserve the very important social function they provide. In sum, this position states that comedians should be exempt from moral blame insofar as they are cultural contributors who perform the unique and important psychological service of providing relief from the overwhelming seriousness of life.

This position implies a definition of humor similar to Sigmund Freud's Relief theory. Recall, Freud states that social pressures build up in our psyches, and urges for sexual or aggressive release must find a way to escape (Morreall 1987, 18). To use Norton's language, the terrible evils of the world are too much for our minds to handle, and cause tensions to build up in us like a pressure valve. Being able to laugh at these evils releases these tensions in psychologically safe and healthy ways. We can spend the rest of the day, Norton argues, thinking critically about those issues, but in the context of

comedy we should, in some sense, be prepared to leave our moral sensitivity at the door. Comedy should be understood as a gift and must remain a socially acceptable way to get relief. Censorship or moral condemnation of comedy will rob audiences and comedians alike from a crucial and necessary service. We should grant comedians the moral leniency to joke about even the most serious subjects without fear of monetary or social condemnation in order to preserve the very important social function they provide. Besides, comedians like Bill Burr argue, there is no *real* harm that comes from jokes, and if there is, it is certainly worth the overall greater happiness of a society (Burr 2015).

This approach also has flaws. Either 1) it provides a special moral exemption for one particular group of people, comedians, or 2) it provides an exemption for anyone insofar as they serve the practical function of providing "comic relief". If it is the first, the argument itself is inconsistent, for it claims both that comedians have tangible effects on their audiences (they feel relief) and that comedians have no tangible effects on their audiences (nothing said causes significant harm). But research has shown that it is the former that is correct: humor really *does* effect the way we think. Alice Isen's studies have repeatedly shown that humor primes the creation of in- and out-group affiliation: those being laughed at and those doing the laughing (Isen 2000, 2001). Kwame Anthony Appiah argues alongside Ian Hacking, Drucilla Cornell and Kenneth Panfilo that, "languages actually create different worlds" (Cornell and Panfilo 2010, 27). He argues that sometimes the use of social categories we know to be false generates those very categories – in Appiah's example, it is the designating terms of hetero- and homosexuality. The use of these terms, Hacking argues, created a binary understanding of sexual categories. People then used these categories as self-designations. These self-

designations came with self-imposed "rules" of conduct; if I am a homosexual, then I must only engage in sexual activity with people of my own sex. I act the designation and thus create the category as corresponding to reality. As a result, "A false hypothesis becomes true, just as a false hypothesis that people are trustworthy becomes true in a society where enough people believe it" (141). Cassirer would understand this in terms of the way in which we symbolize in culture, and it is precisely when "false hypotheses" become intentionally spread for nefarious reasons that we run into the dangers associated with political myth.

The language we use in jokes to designate others create concepts about those others that influence, if not determine, the way we think about them. Scholarship regarding the effects of cultural shifts in humor have been documented by historians, sociologists, and philosophers alike, such as Mel Watkins' *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy from Slavery to Chris Rock* (1994/1999), Steve Lipman's *Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humor during the Holocaust* (1991), and, more recently, Johanna Gilbert's *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique* (2004) and Rebecca Krefting's *All Joking Aside: American Humor and its Discontents* (2014). Lindy West, respondent to Norton in the debate above, explains, "I'm sure sixty years ago there were some 'hilarious' jokes about black people, and comedy was way more overtly racist sixty years ago, and it's not a coincidence that life was more hostile and dangerous for black people" ("Totally Biased" 2013). Just because the jokes are "hilarious", she argues, doesn't mean that they didn't have effects on the way that others thought about and treated the butts of those jokes. And, as Gilbert notes, comedy can be (and has been) weaponized for a particular end and can create or destroy feelings of

connection with individuals or groups: “Whether performing in a comedy club or our stumping for votes, humorists engage in a power play with real or imaged targets, entertaining audiences as they promote agendas” (Gilbert 2004: 13). Intentional or not, the effects of the jokes we tell go beyond the laughter they may inspire. To pretend that they don’t, as the exemption argument seems to want to do, is simply incorrect. West summarizes the inconsistency of the exemption argument beautifully: “You don’t get to say that comedy is this sacred, powerful, vital thing that we need to protect because it’s speaks truth to power…and then also be like, ‘well it’s just a joke, language doesn’t affect our lives at all’.” (“Totally Biased” 2013).

If we don’t want to fall into the inconsistency of the “comedians are morally exempt” claim, then we could go with the latter claim that anyone who provides comic relief is morally exempt. But this is counterintuitive. Granting someone a moral exemption so long as they claim that they are “just joking” is tantamount to handing out the moral equivalent of a “get out of jail free” card. Most, if not all, of us are guilty of back-peddling on an offensive comment by claiming that we were just joking. We try to erase the harm caused by the comment, not by apologizing but by saying that it was all in jest. We feel upset when others retain their offense after our explanation. Most, if not all, of us have also been the one to refuse to excuse the comments of another based on the “just joking” defense. And it’s not just that we don’t believe that the comment was a joke, it’s that we feel justifiably upset *even if it was*. The joke crossed the line, we would say, and therefore we will hold the person morally responsible for telling it. So while the exemption argument may be popular, it doesn’t correspond to our actual lived experiences. Either the position applies only to comedians, and the whole argument is a

contradiction, or it applies to everyone, and the "just joking" tag is a poor and unjustified excuse for moral exemption.

This leaves us with only one remaining approach – the objective position. An objective position would state that there are instances of humor which are morally wrong, regardless of the particular circumstances in which it occurred. We would be able to determine beforehand if a joke should be told, rather than wait to see the reaction of the audience, by which time it would be "too late". Furthermore, it is only through an objective approach that we would ever be morally justified in holding each other accountable. If comedy is merely subjective, then we have no just foundation, that is, no *good reason*, to punish the "insult comic" bully; her behavior falls perfectly in line with her particular comedic tastes, and those tastes happen to be different from those if her victim. Her victim has no legitimate cause for complaint – the bully's preference in comedy may be different, but we have no objective measure against which we could possibly determine whether that taste is morally blameworthy. In other words, without an objective method through which we can judge the morality of jokes, 1) we would be proceeding contrary to the Marburg method for a cultural philosophy of culture, and 2) we have no legitimate justification to punish someone, or even be upset with them, for anything, insofar as anything can be called "humor" and thus exempt from moral judgment. But we *ought* to be able to place blame on the bully for picking on a classmate, even if the bully argues that they were "just joking" and didn't mean any harm, and humor ought to be subject to moral evaluations just like every other symbolic form.

5.3: Theory: Symbolic Forms and Idealization

I argue that both the *idealization* guiding the use of humor and the *function* of that humor can give us the objective frame to construct a morality of humor. I suggest that we ask two questions: 1) what is the idealized aim of the joke? and 2) what is the functional aim of the joke? The questions come from the two most important normative elements of the philosophy of symbolic forms: the function of the symbolic form in question and the ideal end of culture

Our guiding principle for outlining an objective ethic of humor is that of humor's principle function in the human story – the disruption of epistemic vice. As mentioned in chapter 4, humor's principle function, and its unique role in the human struggle for liberation, is to reveal and disrupt epistemic vice. Epistemic vices, recall, are ways of thinking that prevent the possibility of learning, such as arrogance, laziness, and close-mindedness (Medina 2013, 23). Scholars like Lydia Amir go further than myself in arguing that humor can lead to the development of epistemic virtues, serving the moral function of *reversing* these vicious habits, specifically regarding development of self-acceptance and self-liberation, "gradually freeing oneself" from imprisoning attitudes of oneself and others (Amir 2017, 122). And while we know that freedom for humanity is an ideal goal, and one that may be impossible to attain, humor is one way we can struggle toward it.

We know from chapter 2 culture's ultimate aim – let's explore thus further in the moral context. Culture struggles toward an ideal of *freedom*:

> Human culture taken as a whole may be described as the process of man's progressive self-liberation. Language, art, religion, science, are various phases in this process. In all of them man discovers and proves a new

> power – the power to build up a world of his own, an "ideal" world…All these functions [of each symbolic form] complete and complement one another. Each one opens a new horizon and shows us a new aspect of humanity. (Cassirer 1944a, 228)

Symbolic forms, Cassirer reminds us, are not in competition with each other but rather work in unison to reach freedom. Culture leads us toward an active, self-reflective happiness (Cassirer 2000, 104).

Of course, this may be an impossible ideal, but that doesn't mean we should not, or do not, aim for it in our cultural expressions. In fact, Kant scholar Hans Vaihinger, a contemporary of Cassirer, argued at length in the early 20th century for the value of impossible ideals even when those ideals are known to be false.

Vaihinger began writing *The Philosophy of 'As if': A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind* in 1876 as part of his dissertation. It was published in German in 1911, and had its first English release in 1924. Cassirer was aware of Vaihinger's work; he wrote a review of the "as-if" thesis in *Aufsätze und kleine Schriften* (Cassirer 1921, 180-185). His opinion is ultimately favorable; he praises Vaihinger for understanding the need and impulse for "fictions" and variable perspectives (181) though challenges some of Vaihinger's larger epistemic implications (182). It is their philosophical heritage and love of Kant that gives their work compatibility. Vaihinger's interest in the seemingly irrational aspects of human activity, for example, are shared by Cassirer; both thinkers thought that the impulse to define and simplify everything on the basis of a strict, Western defintion of reason was misguided (Vaihinger xxix; Cassirer 1944a, 81). Vaihinger's interest in irrationality was sparked by Kant's

antinomies of reason and nurtured by Schopenhauer, who "recognized irrationality openly and honorably, and who attempted to explain it in his system of philosophy", a testament to "Schopenhauer's love of truth" (xxix).

From this interest grew what Vaihinger calls the philosophy of 'As If', an impressive treatise on the philosophical value of *intentionally* positing ideals that we know to be false "in order to overcome difficulties of thought by roundabout ways and by-paths" (xlvii). He summarizes a key conclusion of his work as follows:

> The 'As if' world, which is formed in this [intentionally false] manner, the world of "unreal" is just as important as the world of the so-called real or actual (in the ordinary sense of the word); indeed it is far more important for ethics and aesthetics. This aesthetic and ethical world of 'As if', the world of the unreal, bcomes finally for us a world of values (xlvii)

This is where the connection between Vaihinger and Cassirer becomes the most clear: both writers insist that, from a particular horizon (to use a term common in the writings of both philosophers), human activity and life is irrational. But irrational does not mean inferior or without value. It is not "primitive" in a pre-cultural or uncivilized sense. Irrationality is an inescapable part of the human reality. In all of our activities, we posit ideals that we know are impossible, unattainable, and/or contradictory; this for Cassirer is what culture *is*. The fact that these ideals are known to be false but are strived for anyway is *only* incomprehensible *if we impose upon humanity the inhuman standard of pure rationality*. To put it in Cassirer's language, it is the mistake of aggrandizing the symbolic form of reason over all others that leads to the wrongheaded impulse to dismiss or subsume these equally important but rationally incomprehensible forms of culture.

And when we do this, we *miss something* about the forms we are trying to bring under the control of reason, at best. We pervert the whole of humanity to make it fit inside reason's box, and consequently wind up with something that has no correspondence whatsoever with actual human experience.

The idea of operating on an ideal, even if we know it is unattainable, is not a new idea. In Kwame Anthony Appiah's *As If: Idealization and Ideals* (2017), a study of Vaihinger's text, he writes: "Once we come to see that *many* of our best theories are idealizations, we will also see why *our best chance of understanding the world must be to have a plurality of ways of thinking about it*" (Appiah x, my emphasis). That is, it makes sense that something as ordinary as humor could provide us with insight into the world, even if we don't tend to think about it as having serious impacts or implications. When it comes to understanding how ideals can help us in terms of morality, Appiah explains, "the idea that a thought might be useful for some purpose other than mirroring reality invites us to consider what that purpose is…and whether it is good or evil" (4). He writes that we "will need to have many pictures in the long run…And whenever someone proposes replacing one of our many pictures with a better picture, it will always be a good idea to ask Vaihinger's question: 'Better for what?'" (2017, 111). And later, "we need to ask not just what false claims a theory treats as true, but also for what *purposes* this idealization occurs" (2017, 115, my emphasis). Even if an ideal is unattainable, I can still submit that I should behave *as if it were* "because the world will be better if all or most of us act as if it is so" (2017, 133). And, Appiah claims, we do, in fact, operate in this way, "because most of us do want to make the world better, even if we aren't always clear about how that is it be done" (135). And indeed, this impulse is, for Cassirer, the

human story itself. Humanity struggles, though trial and error, to meet its ideal end. We cannot but posit an ideal to which we struggle, and culture struggles toward freedom. This pragmatic angle, while not obvious in Cassirer, is present, as noted by Sebastian Luft (2018) and Randall Auxier (2018).

Idealizations are only useful, Appiah contends, insofar as they make a practical difference in action (135). Morally speaking, this means that what we present as our ideal world is ultimately inconsequential if it does not have some sort of effect, on a large or small scale, on our actions. For example, when I teach my children to say "please" and "thank you", I am idealizing a world in which they are always polite, grateful, and kind. That is the reason I teach those words to them. This idealized world, while impossible to actualize (no one is ever *always* polite, grateful, and kind), is morally valuable only when I act upon it and it is acted upon by others. It becomes a morally *praiseworthy* idealization when the children behave in alignment with this ideal. But the same could not be said for an ideal which guides my teaching of children that they should slap those who mock them. The ideal that I am projecting here is one in which justice is violent and instantaneous. When I teach my child to hit others, I teach her that, in an ideal world, violence is the only way to stop people from behaving in ways that she doesn't like, and that she is justified in deciding whose actions deserve her punishment. This would be an ideal that is morally *blameworthy* when my child acts on it.

We posit ideals, as Vaihinger and Cassirer insist. Culture is the struggle for freedom, Cassirer says, and this ideal guides us despite our constant failures. Every symbolic form aims for freedom in its own particular way; humor, is no different. The way humor operates is through its unique and irreducible function: the disruption of

epistemic viciousness. These two points, that humor functions to reveal epistemic viciousness and that idealizations have moral value when they are acted upon, ground the questions that I suggest can serve as the objective frame for a critical ethic of humor. While Appiah works from idealizations to actions, I want to take the 'As if' understanding to work from the action, a joke in this case, to an understanding of the posited ideal. I wish to ask the "to what end?" question of humor, which has in two parts: 1) is the joke idealizing a liberated world (the aim of culture) 2) with curious (epistemically virtuous) people? The question considers whether the telling of the joke encourages the ideal to which it aims, specifically in regard to whether it fulfils the function of humor by making us pay attention to things we ordinarily ignore. This approach is objective because it doesn't require us to have any information about the *intentions* of the person telling the joke, to consider the *reaction* of the audience, or the particular preference of one's sense of humor. This avoids the problems of the subjective and exemption approaches we explored earlier.

5.4: Application: The domestic violence joke

Let's test out the theory with the joke from above:

I like my beer like I like my violence: domestic.

To determine if this joke is ethical, we should ask, 1) is the joke idealizing a liberated world (the aim of culture) 2) with curious (epistemically virtuous) people?

First things first. The joke presents a world where domestic violence is preferred over other types of violence. Clearly, this is a picture of an ideal world that is oppressive – it dignifies domestic violence *as if* domestic violence were desirable, or at least as morally neutral as one's taste in beer. Domestic violence is treated in this joke as an

inevitable part of life at best, or an enjoyable activity at worst. Based on the *factum* of the content, we must answer the first part of the question – is the joke idealizing a liberated world? – with a resounding "no".

The second part of my question regards the function of humor, asking whether the world idealized is inhabited by "curious (epistemically virtuous) people". Were any curious person to think more critically about the content, they would find a host of problematic and harmful implications. The joke minimizes physical harm against others, "promoting a lack of concern for something about which people should be concerned" (Morreall 2009, 110). Since the joke encourages lazy thinking, it is promoting epistemic viciousness, and is therefore acting *against* humor's cultural function. Given that we answered in the negative to both parts of my question by looking at the content of the joke, and not at the intentions, perspectives, or preferences of the teller or audience, we can conclude objectively that the joke is ethically problematic. This answer can frame the critic's more nuanced analysis, determine where on the moral continuum the joke falls, and place responsibility on the appropriate agent.

This is not to say, however, that a joke with content about domestic violence, or any type of violence, will never pass the objectivity test I present here. For example, take this joke from comedian Norm MacDonald regarding rape allegations against Bill Cosby, a comedian who was known for his wholesome, family friendly act, and his criticisms of comedians like Chris Rock and Eddie Murphy for using "bad words" in their sets. Here is a portion of MacDonald's bit:

> My buddy said, "The worst part about Cosby was that he was a hypocrite." I said, "I don't think that was the worst part. To me the worst

> part was the raping. Way up high. Then the second would be the drugging. Then the third would be the scheming. But anyways hypocripsy would be way down the line, like on the fourth page…Like I'm no expert but I think probably most rapists are hypocrites. You don't meet a lot of guys who go "I like to rape, I don't give a fuck. I know it's not politically correct thing to say, but I like raping." And you go, "goddamn, at least he's not a hypocrite." If that's the worst part of it. (MacDonald 2016)

This joke is about sexual violence against women. But it is not a morally problematic joke. The joke idealizes a world where harm is understood as worse than hypocrisy. It idealizes a world where everyone understands that the actions are unacceptable whether or not the actor would outwardly endorse them, and undermines the idea that hypocrisy is somehow worse than committing sexual violence. The "buddy" in the joke is intentionally taken down by MacDonald for holding a position which is oppressive, that is, a position which implies that rape is fine if the rapist acknowledges their actions. In the world idealized in the joke, this position is obviously false – taking ownership of the harm you do does not lessen that harm. In the world idealized by this joke, everyone understands clearly that you do not drug and sexually assault people. It is a joke that takes the harm caused by Cosby, or anyone else who perpetrates sexual violence, seriously. So we can certainly answer the first part of the question, "is the joke idealizing a liberated world?" with a "yes". This world is one where violence is wrong. Furthermore, it challenges the lazy thinking of MacDonald's friend. To think that hypocrisy is the problem with Cosby, or any rapist, is a clear indication of someone who has not thought very long or hard about the topic. It demolishes the arrogance behind the

view by pointing out its absurdity, and reveals a deeply problematic understanding of the situation. In this way, we can answer the second half of the question regarding humor's function with another "yes". Humor is *supposed* to reveal precisely these epistemic vices. This joke, then, is morally praiseworthy on both counts.

Now that we have an objective frame for the critic to ground her investigations, we can begin the complex work of developing and incorporating guidelines for the subjective, embodied interpretations.

5.5: Conclusion

Recall my discussion of Cassirer's successful implementation of the Marburg mission through his interdisciplinary methodology in Chapter two: we ought to join with those "on the ground" to collect the facts, then interpret those facts. Interpretation, remember, is necessarily subjective, embodied, and historical – I am the interpreter of the data, and I am a person with a rich inner world of experiences and associations which I have gathered as a result of being in the body I have at this particular moment in time. This is the methodology that Cassirer insists upon. So the first rule of the critical philosopher of the symbolic form of humor is to make sure that she understands herself as a subjective interpreter that is bound to the objective reality around her. That is, my opinion of the topic of my research will influence my interpretation of it, but it cannot bias my interpretation, insofar as bias refers to the positing or inventing of data that does not exist.

The methodology of the subjective and exemption approaches to ethics in humor are antithetical to the Marburg method. These approaches are flawed at best, empty at worst. I argued that only an objective approach to humor would give us the tools

necessary to hold comedians (or jokesters of a non-professional nature) accountable for the content they chose to perform. Without an objective measure through which to determine whether a joke is truly morally blameworthy, we're left with no choice than to write off an insulting or harmful joke as a simple difference of taste between the teller and the offended. This is particularly dissatisfying when we think of those circumstances where joking becomes a free pass to behave viciously toward others. Words do matter, and humor impacts culture. Comedians should be held to the same standards as any other cultural contributor. This is not to say, however, that comedians should be *prevented* or *banned* from telling offensive jokes – that is a different matter altogether, and one that must wait for another time.

Our objective framing of the ethics question gives us a universal standard against which we can measure the content of a joke. When we consider the role of humor in the larger cultural picture, we see clearly its socio-political power. Humor's special role in the struggle toward liberation is to reveal epistemic viciousness which prevents learning, hindering our ability to think outside of the box and beyond the status quo. When humor encourages closed-minded thought, encourages us to be lazy in our thinking, or reinforces arrogance of thought, it operates against the very function it ought to serve. When it idealizes an oppressive or otherwise imprisoned end, it works against the goal of culture itself. With these as starting points, we can begin the hard work of developing a more complete objective method of making moral judgments in humor.

What I have offered is questions that aim to answer the questions of objective reality – what, outside of my subjective interpretation, is the point of it all? Once we answer these questions, we can start to explore the influence of my subjective, embodied

interpretation in light of those objective foundations to understand what it *means* to human beings. A full reconstruction of the philosophy of the symbolic form of humor would require objective and subjective elements.

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